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The Narrative Inquiry Museum: An Exploration
of the Relationship Between Narrative and
Art Museum Education

Angela Ames West

A thesis submitted to the faculty of
Brigham Young University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts

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ABSTRACT

The Narrative Inquiry Museum: An Exploration of the Relationship Between Narrative and Art Museum Education

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For art to become personally meaningful to visitors, museums need to view art interpretation as a narrative inquiry process. General museum visitors without art expertise naturally make meaning of art by constructing stories around a work to relate to it. Narrative inquiry, a story based exploration of experience, fits into contemporary museum education theory because it is a constructive and participatory meaning making process. This thesis examines how art museums can build upon visitors' natural interpretive behaviors, by employing art-based narrative inquiry practices and using the work of art as a narrative story text. Individuals learn when their personal narrative comes into conflict with the narrative of the museum and they negotiate new meaning. This kind of narrative learning is a process of inquiry that visitors must engage in themselves. The art museum interpretive experience can foster in visitors the ability to engage in an art-based narrative inquiry process by suspending disbelief, recalling personal memories, comparing different narrative versions, imagining possible meanings, and re-storying experiences into new understandings. This research text explores these topics through a narrative based method of inquiry comprised of a series of autobiographical stories describing the researcher's experiences in coming to understand the relationship between narrative inquiry and art museum education.

Keywords: story, narrative, narrative inquiry, art-based narrative inquiry, art museum education, meaning making, interpretation, constructive, participatory, Lisa C. Roberts

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When learning becomes a constructive act, as in the case of narrative methods of inquiry, far more people play a significant role in the research process than can ever be adequately acknowledged. I'm sure that if I counted all of the students, docents, colleagues, and scholars who have provided key insights into my understanding, the list of supporting characters in my research narrative could realistically add up to triple digits. But, there are a few important people who, having personally walked through parts of this educational journey with me, must be recognized as main characters in my narrative and, in many cases, co-authors of the story you are about to read.

In many ways, the impetus for my continued education was provided by a seventeen-year-old student named Joseph Perry. After hearing me explain to a class the significance of the butterfly as a symbol in my life, he devised his own symbol to live by. It was a frozen little bush buried in snow, with the sun shining on it to melt the snow away. His life really was like the sunshine in the dark, cold winters of many people's lives. Together, we learned a lot about how art can invite that same warmth into the world. We were in the process of writing a series of illustrated stories for publication when he suffered from a major heart-attack that took his life.

Joe's greatest dream was to become a published author, so when he died, I asked his mother if I could finish his stories and make sure his dream came true. She granted her permission, provided that I give the credit to Joe. I also made a solemn promise to Joseph's mother on the day he died: I promised her that I would never quit teaching. When I made that promise to her, I committed myself even more completely to a life-long discovery of the affective nature of art education. So, now I write this story for, and in behalf of, Joe. It's not one

of the stories he originally penned, but in many ways, he began the writing of it. It is a story written for him and a story inspired by him. As promised, I'd like to give him the credit.

There are two other special students who played significant roles in co-authoring the original Redbook Project. In order to protect their privacy, I have referred to them as Jake and Cami in this text. But, they know who they are and must know that they wrote the first narrative inquiry research texts I'd ever read; and in effect, wrote for me a new narrative about what it means to learn and to educate.

The most dramatic twist in the plot of my story was introduced when two of the most important, but least assuming, main characters entered the scene. Ron and Nancy Andersen were written into the script as part-time volunteer docents, but became dedicated, full-time mentors who instilled in me a passion for story. It was their intense love and inquisitive nature that inspired me to find the courage to suspend my disbelief and go in search of the place where story and art co-exist. They opened my heart to be able to imagine the impossible.

I owe great thanks to my advisors, Dr. Sharon Gray and Dr. Mark Graham. But, I owe my narrative epiphany to Dr. Daniel T. Barney. Through no more than ten minutes of conversation and two simple questions, he introduced me to narrative methodologies, related them to my museum world, and set the entire course of this narrative journey. It was Dr. Rita R. Wright who eventually helped me find a temporary resolution to the conflict in my story, and interpretive planner Maryanne Andrus who inspires the chapters yet to come.

And yet, the most significant main characters in my story have, for the most part, remained invisible in my narration of it. My mother and father raised me from a very young age to be a constructivist learner. Not one single event in my life has transpired in which their voices were not a part of the dialogue. And in those moments when my career, my degree, and my

future have all seemed so hopeless and impossible they, my siblings, and my husband have continued to construct the story when no one else was there to help. They have always been able to see the wisdom in the stories I am writing when rest of the world can't look past the questions.

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Prologue: An Invitation to the Reader

Dear Reader,

Before you delve into an analysis of my thesis, there are a few things you need to know about what you can expect. My thesis is a different kind of thesis than most that you have read in the past. You may find that the content, structure, and writing style read more like a novel to you than a typical thesis. I am well aware that this may be the case.

After a very long exploration of research methodology options, I only discovered one that I felt would truly allow me to practice in my research the principles that I preach. It became clear to me that a narrative methodology would allow me to learn by implementing contemporary museum education principles and would also parallel my chosen research topic focused on the relationship between learning and stories. No other methodology I looked into could fulfill those criteria.

Narrative Inquiry is a relatively new research practice and is still just emerging on the academic scene; and so I find that to every new individual I introduce to my work, I must also offer a bit of an explanation which usually goes something like this:

My chosen research methodology does not consist of the kind of research you might expect to find in a scholarly text in that it is not intended to be objective. Narrative methodologies embrace the presence of the researcher in the study and assert that because all learners build knowledge upon their own experience, some level of subjectivity is to be expected, and even embraced. Therefore, it is essential as a narrative inquirer for me to share with you the personal experiences I have had in my life that will shape and color my understanding of the research topic.

My thesis consists of a series of short autobiographical stories illustrating my personal learning experiences. It consists of first person accounts written in a very informal, personal, and even conversational voice. It isn't all written in the past tense, like most thesis texts that record research findings after the study and analysis is complete. That's how it's supposed to be. I've specifically designed my work that way to fit a narrative format.

Narrative research is more about the process of exploring a topic or phenomenon by asking a series of questions than it is about finding one clearly defined answer (Cresswell, 2007). It's really about discovering a variety of possible meanings that can be derived from one idea when it is explored in different contexts (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). It is a journey of discovery, and my intent as a researcher is not to provide you with an answer, a theory, or recommendations. It is to describe for you my own personal learning process by telling you a series of short stories that will illustrate my sequential thought processing step-by-step throughout my journey of discovery. By exploring these experiences with me, you should come to understand my process of discovery within my personal context of meaning making, complete with all of the subtle nuances of the issues that became important to me in the day-to-day practice of museum education.

Many of my stories were written as memories of experiences from my past. In these instances, I have tried to help you understand how I have worked through difficult concepts by reflecting on the past and imagining the future. So, you will find past, present, and future tense intermingled. That's just my way of helping you see the experience through my eyes as my mind toggled between experiencing the present, looking backward to various versions of the past, and trying to anticipate the future.

In order to help you understand the sequencing of my learning process, I have also organized my thesis chapters in a format that you probably won't be used to. I do not have a separate chapter compartmentalizing my literature review. Instead, I have woven my extensive literature search into my personal narratives. This was the easiest way to help you understand how my studies were incremental and applied as I sought answers to specific questions along the way and folded the information I found into my own thought processes. Likewise, you will not encounter an outline of my research methodology until chapter three because, sequentially, that is where my exploration of narrative inquiry fits into the story. If I were to displace it, you would not understand the subsequent paradigm shift.

That said, I know that this methodology, when compared to so many that are formally structured, may appear at first glance to be shallow. I am also fully aware that sometimes it seems risky to trust a practice so new and unfamiliar to provide one with the kind of scholarly expertise denoted by the earning of a degree. So, before you even take a look at chapter one, I'd like to ask of you a favor.

You are about to embark on a journey of discovery learning with me. You will witness a constructive learning process as you travel to new places, talk to new people, and experience new things vicariously with me. We will begin our journey by asking the question, "How does the story of a work of art help people make meaning in their lives?"

Part way through our exploration, you will come to understand why that research question quickly became, "What is the relationship between story and art education?" And, by the end of our journey, you will have discovered with me why the question I really should have been asking was, "What is the relationship between narrative inquiry and art museum education?"

If you will choose to set aside any prior expectations that educational research should be objective, reductionist, and conclusive, you will encounter a variety of different theories and opinions on the topic, and have an opportunity to sort through the complexities of some educational theories on your own. By the time we conclude, you may not agree with the statements I have made or the ways in which I have chosen to make meaning of my personal experiences. But, you will have experienced an honest look into the circumstances under which I formulated my opinions and you might be able to understand why I choose to see the world of museum art education the way I do. You will have the opportunity to witness how I conduct scholarly research on a daily basis, and how I routinely integrate it into my daily professional practice.

This is an invitation for you to take a narrative leap with me. I hope you enjoy the journey.

Sincerely,

Angela A. West

Chapter One Preface

Dear Reader,

While the entire text of my thesis is autobiographical in nature, the first chapter is comprised of two stories that are much more personally reflective than the content it precedes.

These narratives reach the farthest back into my history and will give you a glimpse into my personal motivations for exploring the relationship between story and art. These narratives will help prepare you to understand my personal biases, the assumptions under which I operate, and philosophical framework from which I began to approach the research topic.

“The Butterfly Effect” recounts a memory, the significance of which is twofold. It was the first time I remember having an experience with art that became transformative in my life, and it also is the first time I remember the story of a work of art being paramount to an aesthetic experience. The correlation between these two “firsts” is certainly not evidential, but as you will see, it fueled the fire driving me to understand the relationship between story and aesthetic experience.

The second section, “A Narrative Journey”, relates the story of my educational background and explains the roots of my career experience. These roots run deep in my understanding of the field of education and have served to anchor my heart in this inquiry, so it is important for you to understand the stuff these experiences are made of.

Hopefully, as you step into the stories of my past, something in the telling of them will spark memories of your own experiences in which story and art have both played a part. I hope you will hold on to those memories to help you understand your own reactions to my research as you explore the remainder of this document.

The Art That Created Me

“This telling of ourselves, this meeting of ourselves in the past through inquiry, makes clear that as inquirers we, too, are part of the parade. We have helped make the world in which we find ourselves. We are not merely objective inquirers, people on the high road, who study a world lesser in quality than our moral temperament would have it, people who study a world we did not help create....Being in this world, we need to remake ourselves as well as offer up research understandings that could lead to a better world.” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 61)

The Butterfly Effect

Behind a very ordinary looking storefront, quietly tucked away in a dusty little crevice somewhere in the bustling heart of down town Beijing, China, there is a modest artist’s shop. His small, one-room studio is magnificently cluttered with brushwork masterpieces, rolls of rice paper, and ornately painted silk kites. There is a tiny door frame almost hidden on the left side wall. If one is daring enough to climb one step up over the threshold into this long, narrow storage corridor, he might just find himself in the midst of a life altering moment as did I.

The chattering voices of my tour group dissolved into the silence as I cautiously stepped into the dim, flickering neon light. The narrow passage, barely wide enough for two to cross paths in, was hung with ink paintings and calligraphy from ceiling to floor. I was only nineteen and taking my first steps forward into the diverse world outside of myself. Lost in the experience of this unusual place, I paused to commit to memory the dust lingering in the dimly lit air and the musty scent of rice paper and cinnabar ink tinged with faint sweet ginger.

“Thousands of paintings, and all identical right down to the smallest brush stroke,” I thought. “So goes the canon.” I glanced over a dozen duplicate warrior men and then leaned forward across a narrow counter to assess the brushstrokes of a giant fuchsia peony. My eyes

followed the floral burst around the canvas and rested in a practically empty corner where one solitary, delicate blue butterfly captivated my attention. It seemed so small in such a crowded world of majestic beauties. Although dignified, it seemed so sad and so very alone. That butterfly, I was sure, knew exactly how sad and alone and lost I felt inside. Certain that this mystical creature understood how excluded I felt from the rest of the world, I watched it intently for some sign of mutual awareness and concern.



Figure 1.1. *Butterfly Wings*, Artist Unknown

“I see that you’ve noticed the butterfly,” cooed a soft gentle voice beside me. Startled, I turned to find that the artist’s wife had silently approached me and had been carefully reading my facial expression for some time.

“It’s beautiful.” I whispered with reverence. “But it is so small and it is the only one among so many flowers.”

“Small, yes. But, it is the most important part of the story.” She smiled softly. “Do you know the story of the butterfly? Do you know how the butterfly came to be?” Before I could even answer, I was caught up in the excitement of a mystical ancient legend.

The details of this legend are powerful and poignant, but for the purposes of this reflection they are of little consequence. I will simply say that the message that little butterfly carried on its wings that day was not of loneliness or exclusion. No, indeed those very wings that looked so lonesome through my eyes had been for centuries a cultural symbol of the kind of unconditional and undying love that renders human bonds eternally unbreakable. In concluding her story, the artist's wife leaned forward, linked her thumbs together and splayed her fingers outward to form two butterfly wings. As she silently waved them back and forth, my butterfly fluttered right off the rice paper, hung in the air before me, and whispered, "You are never alone. There is love in this world strong enough to breach the sorrow that you're feeling."

Did you know that when a tiny blue butterfly beats its wings somewhere in China, it can set in motion a reaction that will forever influence the course of a young American girl's life? It can, and it did. I call it "The Butterfly Effect" in my life.

In that moment that little ink butterfly reached into my soul and in many ways created the world anew for me. I saw myself no longer as a solitary creature in an isolated world. A butterfly has two wings, each representing the spirit of a singular soul never alone, but *always* inextricably connected to and working in complete harmony with another in eternal existence. Perhaps I had always failed when trying to fly because I thought I only had one wing.

But now, a second wing unfolded, and *I* became someone who existed as part of a greater life. Who was my other wing? A best friend? A sibling? A student? A stranger? A deity? And if I chose to be united with any of these in the flight of life, how would it change my identity? How would it change *our* existence, *our* world, *our* lives? Suddenly *I* had the potential to be re-created anew in relationship to every individual in the universe. *I* could don wings of myriad shapes and colors.

I spent my entire high school career immersed in the world of artistic creation because the act of creating art had a tremendous healing and empowering effect in my life. It was a gift I wanted to share with other teenagers who might benefit from the act of creation like I had. And so, as a college freshman, I had traveled to this far off place with the university's Art Education Department testing the waters to see if becoming an art teacher was really the right thing for me.

I thought I wanted to become an art teacher because the ability to create had changed my life. But, I wasn't creating the art this time, it was creating me; and if it could make a new me, and a new world around me, then art could create better lives for all of the people around me as well.

As a result of the Chinese butterfly effect, a new ideal sprouted wings in my heart that has permeated every aspect of my life as I have been summoned from one experience to the next. Late in the evening, eleven floors above the scurrying swarm in the street and alone in the silence of my hotel room, I began the search for a second wing as I penned the following life-altering initiative:

“I want to make children all over the world smile....I want to use art to give people all over the world a sense of hope, faith, joy, and self-worth that they never even imagined could exist.”

From that moment, the butterfly was etched into my memory as a symbol of hope, of healing, of identity, and especially of unconditional and ever present support. I envisioned myself growing up to wear beautiful blue butterfly wings--to be the kind of individual who chose to cherish others with an unconditional love that would heal hearts by bridging sorrows, loneliness, and pain.

It was an unrealistic goal and an impossible dream. But reflecting upon my idealistic, romantic younger self, I thank that child for daring to suspend her disbelief and choosing to expect extraordinary things. It was the desires of her heart that transformed a million insignificant decisions into a series of integral events all culminating in the tangible reality of where I am today.

A Narrative Journey

The process of metamorphosis from childhood to adulthood demands of all growing girls a solid definition of what they intend to be and what they are going to do when they grow up. In a survival-first world my reply, “I want to be a butterfly who uses art to change the world!” was not a responsible answer.

Imagine the look on the face of my academic advisor when this wide eyed, breathless girl showed up in her office stating, “I want to be an art teacher, but not a normal art teacher. I want to use art to change lives. *How do I get there?*” Her advice was to select a practical profession by which to make a living and try to work in ways to make little things like that happen along the way. “Jobs like that just don’t exist. That’s the kind of job you have to slowly create for yourself over time.” With the *world’s* questions quickly answered, I was identified as an art educator and set on the fast track to graduation. I have spent the ensuing decade seeking the answer to *my* question: *How do I get there?*

In this long quest to find purpose and meaning in my career and in my life, I have, for quite some time, felt as though I’m simply flapping my wings and getting nowhere. It’s almost as if I’m still trying to fly with only one wing. I am perpetually fluttering from task to task, from one job description to the next, from one self-definition to another, always with the hope of

landing in a place rich with the fulfillment of knowing that I've found a way to accomplish that goal.

As an undergraduate student, reflecting upon my personal high school experience, I developed my own theories about how I would use art curriculum to change the lives of my students just like it had changed mine. I was trained in educational methodology and pedagogy by some of the most well-known forerunners in the age of Discipline Based Art Education. While my professors were consistently reminding other students to include in their curricula objectives related to all five of the art disciplines (including visual culture), they were simultaneously reminding me to separate my “affective teaching objectives” from the “art education objectives” that I was supposed to be teaching.

It seemed that no matter what art related skill set, thought process, or content I was teaching, it was all a means to a greater, deeper educational end: the internal, personal development of the student. As we made consistent efforts to write and advocate a rationale for art education in the public school system, quiet little flutters made my stomach ache with a twinge of guilt. We lobbied for the importance of teaching art for art's sake, not as a vehicle through which to further the understanding of other academic subjects. But, internally, I valued art primarily as a medium through which all of life was to be taught, not as separate and distinct subject matter.

As graduation neared, I was pushed forward on wings trembling in trepidation with the anticipation that when I graduated, I would finally take flight in the public schools. I settled into the role of student teacher and immediately began seeking ways to supplement my daily commercial art lessons with the flair of an “affective educator”. In all preparations, I asked myself:

“What was it about art that changed me so?”

Over time, I collected a handful of students ready to drop out who became extremely engaged in working on individualized extra-curricular projects. They became particularly engaged in projects like “The Redbook Project” that used stories or personal reflective writings as the foundation for creative works. By the time the semester ended, my students and I had developed an after-school art and literary club tasked with the purpose of writing and illustrating a book entitled “Holding On”. I returned to my desk one evening to find Kami’s “Red Book” sitting on my desk with a note folded into its cover reading, “To me you’re a teacher not only in art but in holding on.” So, I asked myself:

“What is it about these art projects that makes students who are often apathetic want to stay after school?”**“What is it about art that has taught Kami how to hold on?”**

One day, shortly after teaching a lesson on the work of Picasso, I was on my way to the library to work on the “Holding On” project with a group of students. I came around the corner and was hastily headed for the door when I almost tripped over a student who had hunched over, crouched down and nestled himself into the door frame to disguise the fact that he was reading a book. When he looked up and I recognized the face inside that hoodie, I jumped and squealed—more out of astonishment at *who* I found reading than the surprise of almost tripping. It was Jake, my most apathetic student, the one who always skipped class to sleep in the library and had his head down on his desk through the entire Picasso lesson.

“JAKE!” I stammered, “What are you doing down there?”

“I’m reading,” he whispered.

“What are you reading?” I asked as he held up his book and said, “Well, I was thinking that I want to be like Picasso. I want to come up with something new that no one else has ever done before, like that one painting. So, I decided that if I’m going to do that, I need to be the smartest person in the world. And, I was thinking that I might as well start with the hardest thing to learn: Quantum physics.”

My little butterfly wings began beating again with each turn of that page as he flipped through the book to point out all the new things he had learned, only this time they were beating to a slightly different tune. Jake had just experienced a transformative experience with art, but it was very different than mine had been. Art inspired me to see myself differently, and through it, I learned and grew in social competence, emotional intelligence, and identity development. Art had inspired Jake to see the world differently and in so doing, motivated him to develop cognitively. This time, art wasn’t just a vehicle for emotive learning. It was a catalyst for the kind of learning that required great depth of thought and increased desire for insight. It somehow made learning magical, exciting, and fun. Suddenly butterfly wings were not so much about art therapy, personal development, or social equality any more. They were about providing an affective learning experience that was not so much emotive but provocative (Roberts, 1992). So, I asked myself,

“What was it about that painting that opened up Jake’s mind and made him want to make personal connections with the complexities of the universe?”

You would have thought that my heart might have lifted off in graceful flight on the wings of the rewarding experiences I had with these students, but my teaching career never lifted off the ground. I never could find my second wing there. As my stay at that school neared its end, my cooperating teacher was in an absolute panic. The concern she expressed was well

founded, but it painted my brilliant blue wings a stark mothy gray. “When you leave, I’m going to have to start rebuilding my entire art program all over again. You’ve taught all of these kids to have a lot of confidence and hope that they can be artists...but not a single one of them has any *skill*. They love thinking about art, but they can’t *create* it.” And as I reflected on the fact that I didn’t want to spend my career teaching artistic skill, I asked myself:

“What was it that made them love thinking about art more than they loved creating it?”

Having realized the idealistic nature of my passionately pursued goal, I spent the next few years exploring other possible career paths that could be compatible with the diverse interests of my heart and unexpectedly landed in the role of an educator at a “Museum of History and Art”. In this new artistic realm, my focus was to inspire people to think about art in ways that would forge ties and connections to the rest of the world. It was a place where affective values and cognitive learning became motivators for one another (Roberts, 1992). Landing in this new art space was like entering a new and magical world for me: a world in which the big dreams of little girls might have the potential to come true and mortal beings are born up on the wings of angels, who may choose, if they desire, to wear butterfly wings. In an effort to fly into this opportunity with both wings, I asked myself:

What is it about art that can provoke individuals to seek out understanding, make personal connections with factual information, and create meaning in their lives?

I hadn’t been there long before the museum was re-named and the “art” was taken out of its title. It wasn’t until it became a “history museum” that also contained art that I realized I had landed in an environment entrenched in the scholarly world of history. I managed to remain ignorant of the extent to which my art education methodologies and personal ideology had been

influenced by the discipline of history until I began to prepare the curriculum outline for an extensive docent training course. The syllabus that had been used previous to my employment distinguished art interpretation from artifact interpretation with one lecture hour out of forty-eight. That lecture was entitled “storytelling through art”.

If ever there was a paramount moment of epiphany in my story, this was it. They had been teaching their docents that art was simply a medium through which we illustrate historical stories. I knew better than that. I knew that art deserved to be interpreted for art’s sake. I was stuck in the midst of conflict between teaching docents a well-rounded discipline based approach to art interpretation, and continuing to perpetuate the current didactic mentality. It was then that I began to ask myself:

“What is the relationship between story and art?”

I looked back over the countless memories I had collected of aesthetic experiences in which art had a profound enough effect on lives to provoke change, provide enlightenment, or add to understanding. As I struggled with this internal debate, I thought to myself, “They’re not art interpreters! They’re just interpreting history through stories about art.” Then, suddenly, a very similar statement from the past began to echo in my head. It was a comment made by one of my commercial art students when I was student teaching, and at the time it was a very difficult one for me to hear. One day, as I quieted my class and gave them a writing prompt to get their creative juices flowing, he sat on his desk in the middle of the room and called out, “Miss Ames, you’re not an art teacher! You’re like an English teacher who makes us write and read stories about art.”

If that statement haunted me then, it perplexed me now. I was frustrated because the museum had taught its docents not to be art interpreters, but to simply tell stories about art. But,

I had done the exact same thing in my past. In an effort to make art meaningful to ordinary people, I had always emphasized the story related to art and how that story becomes personal to human beings. I developed a curriculum in which art and story were entirely dependent upon one another. I taught my students to paint stories and reflect upon them. I taught my students to read all art as if it was a story and write about it. And, I taught them to narrate their internal lives through art, and re-write their future personal narratives via creation. All other art content and skill had taken a back seat to their stories. And so, I asked myself again:

“What is the relationship between story and art?”

“What is *my* opinion about the relationship between story and art?”

I was jolted by the abrupt realization that I had always felt that it was the narrative delivered through the art that made the difference. I looked deep down into the core of my personal identity and for quite some time studied all that inherently seemed to be “true” at this critical juncture in my own story.

It was the opportunity to illustrate and share their personal stories through art that made my apathetic students want to become engaged in learning. It was the stories of triumph that others told through their art that helped Kami hold on. It was the story of the creation of Picasso’s painting that inspired Jake to learn quantum physics. It was the stories told, or yet to be told, that made thinking about art exciting for those who lacked artistic talent. It was the story of a work of art that had a profound impact on my life and the same visual story that set this course for my career in the beginning.

My heart began to ache with a pounding reminiscent of those same little beating wings that interrupted my peace of mind the first time I was a student of art education. It was as if I had flown back through time and looked upon my classroom of needy students with fresh, new

eyes. Looking back on myself, I now saw a vision of an educator that in many ways had been shaped by this novel interaction with the discipline of history, but had always existed in me throughout the history of my career. I had always been a narrative educator.

This narrative educator, though misunderstood and overlooked for many years, was born of a hundred little cultural influences and life experiences, and had been bound up tightly in a shimmering cocoon, which was spun in a little hidden art studio in China. Hanging in that memory, she had been gradually growing in this pupation of many years, all the while living a healthy existence. I watched her begin to emerge, a creature I barely recognized when confronted with her appearance after metamorphosis. But now, looking back on so many seemingly unrelated experiences, I recognized her face as having been present on every occasion.

That little girl inherited her butterfly wings not from the delicate, well-practiced, and perfectly replicated calligraphic lines that made up the form of a winged creature. They did not come from the history of the time and place in which the physical work was created or the artistic ideology from which its philosophical underpinnings spurned. That little girl flew off into the future on wings borrowed from folklore, from legend and oral tradition, on wings that she borrowed from a story gifted to her *through* art.

Having come to this understanding, as a museum educator, I now ask a very important question that should have been paramount years ago:

“How does the story of a work of art help people make meaning in their lives?”

And so it happened that an idealistic dream proposed by a 20 year old girl set in motion a series of events that stimulated what has now become a life-long pursuit of understanding. “In dreams, it is said that wings represent a release of creative forces, that they give us the ability to

understand and transcend the human condition,” advises artist James Christensen (Greenwich 2006, p. 25). “We have all dreamt of flying. It is said that a figure with one wing is lost in dreams, with the missing wing still beating in the flight of the mind” (Christensen & Horowitz, 2008, p. 133). Yes, I daresay that one of my wings is still fluttering around in that little girl’s dream. Perhaps, through this inquiry into the practical world of real life museum education practices, I can find a second wing.



Figure 1.2. Sleeper Lost In Dreams, James Christensen

Chapter Two Preface

Dear Reader,

In the second chapter of my thesis, you will be introduced to some of my more recent experiences in the professional realm. I need to bring you into the museum with me, because it was in the practice of my profession there that I really began to ask the question, “What is the relationship between story and art museum education?” It wasn’t a formal research topic then, by any means. But, the learning process I became engaged in was a serious study of the topic nonetheless. It was during the course of my day-to-day work when I actually began a pretty extensive literature review of the topic as I struggled every day to understand how I could improve the visitor experience.

Through the following professional experiences, I began to gain an understanding of different perspectives in the field of museum education, and having synthesized existing literature, I began to experience a paradigm shift of my own. I will share with you my first attempt at answering my research question by training a group of docent volunteers to teach about art through the medium of story. Hopefully as you listen to this part of my story, you will begin to see where I was able to successfully integrate new knowledge into my work and professional philosophies. But, I also invite you to assess some of the weakness in the new philosophy I was developing as I explain where my attempts to test new theories failed.

It was upon the foundation of this informal research experience that my scholarly research was built when I officially began the process of writing my Master’s thesis in the ensuing months and decided that the questions I had been asking for my own professional development should be explored in a broader context.

The History in Art

“How might we move beyond the dichotomy that separates ‘professionals’ from ‘laypersons’ to more beneficial and inclusive ways of interacting?...As in the case of history, it seems that understanding the range of ways that people make meaning of objects and using that broadened spectrum as the basis for museum programs and exhibits can open the door to more democratic practices in museums.” (Silverman, 1993, p. 7-9)

Using Art to Tell Stories

The first time I was enlisted to help teach our docent training course, I was still an intern, but being the only art educator among an entire staff of historians, I was the most logical instructor for the training on art interpretation. They could trust me not to mess it up because the educators who had been there before me had spent over 20 years perfecting this world-class training course, and the curriculum would be provided for me. I flipped open the manila folder of lecture materials that had been left on my desk and began to peruse the course outline.

“History...history...artifact interpretation...artifact...hist...art interpretation! There it is...”

One hour. One hour? I was going to teach 80 docents everything they needed to know about how to interpret art in one hour? Sixteen weeks times 3 hour sessions...48 hours of training and I got one hour in a dark auditorium to teach them all the subtle nuances that make art interpretation effective. How is that possible? I flipped the page to the lecture notes provided me and scanned the title:

Using Art in Tours: Storytelling Made Easy

That’s what the title *said*. But I was a fresh art graduate still valiantly striving to prove my professionalism, and having been submerged in the context of a primarily history based museum environment, I could read between the lines: “Using Art...to Tell Stories”.

“Definitely a historian’s stance,” I grumbled under my breath. “We have no fine art, only illustrations of historical content.” I skimmed down the page and my eyes settled on the first interpretive technique outlined in the lecture, “*Focus on the narrative values of the art and the obvious visual messages that are in the art.*”

How could I teach this? I had been taught better than that. I didn’t understand how the culture I was surrounded by seemed to be so lacking in appreciation and understanding of all that art really is. Art is so much more than a didactic illustration of a story. Good art interpretation requires so much more than storytelling, and any docent guided tour through our art galleries should be about the *art*, not about some extraneous theme or historical narrative. I leaned over my desk, put my head in my hands and let out a big sigh. “What am I doing here?” I whispered. “This is a history museum. They don’t understand art.”

That was the first time I recognized the impact that the history museum would have on the course of my career.

I had signed on to work at a “museum of history *and art*”, but it wasn’t until the name was changed and it became a “history museum” (that still included art), that I realized how small a presence *art* really had in this museum. Our museum was a small part of a larger history focused institution, and all department purpose statements, goals, decisions, and priorities reflected that. It felt very much to me like the “art” in our institution had been relegated to second class. In a very short time, I found myself feeling like a solitary advocate for fine art in a universe overflowing with history-centric pedagogy.

I suddenly became acutely aware of how dissimilar history museums are from art museums. Art interpretation is derived from an entirely different methodology than artifact

interpretation. Everything about the content, delivery techniques, and conceptual planning of history exhibits is unlike the way it is done in the art gallery.

The educators who wrote the docent training curriculum I had to deliver were historians. My existing docent staff of 280 had been trained to interpret by a historian, and the reality was that most of the docents volunteering here were retired history teachers or history hobbyists as well. They interpreted art like historians, not like art experts. So, in the weeks leading up to my docent training class on art interpretation, I observed very closely the way *they* did it so that I could better understand how to train them to interpret art properly: the way *we* interpret in art museums.

I very quickly learned that for the most part, they simply didn't address the art in the galleries unless they had to. A select few of our docents were art historians and had enough experience to feel comfortable engaging visitors in conversations about the art, but the majority felt very uncomfortable and insecure when asked to interact with or discuss creative works. Almost every docent I asked felt very comfortable giving tours in the history galleries and interpreting artifacts for visitors. However, when asked about art, they would respond that they knew a lot about the history, but didn't know enough about art to be able to include it in a tour.

They had been taught that they didn't need to know anything more about a work of art than the narrative element that could readily be observed in it. They had been provided with just as much narrative content related to the art as they had been given to interpret the history exhibits. And they had also been taught that interpreting art is not any different than interpreting history. In many ways, I was relieved to know that they also considered the interpretive techniques they had been taught inadequate. They wanted art to be more than a picture book illustration of our history museum as well.

On the other hand, I was dismayed by the reasoning behind their lack of confidence in the presence of a painting. While they had long been taught a simplistic enough method of art interpretation, the prevailing cultural belief had paralyzed them. They thought that art could only be really understood and explained to others by highly trained art historians who knew how to decipher the visual language, and none of them considered themselves to be among that elite class of individuals. That meant that they could tell the story of a didactic work of art, but beyond that, visual works of art were to be avoided.

In order to feel comfortable giving an art-based tour, the docents felt they would need to know a lot about different artistic canons and movements and standard meanings attached to any symbols that might have been used during different time periods. Before they could feel competent, they would need to understand all of the formal principles and elements of art and have a key to understanding meanings to be derived from their use. In essence, they thought that in order to know something about the art on display, they would need to know everything there is to know about art in general.

Interestingly enough, while the thought of being asked to give a tour in an art gallery terrified our docents, almost all of them expressed a deep and profound appreciation for the works in our collection. They begged for opportunities to have conversations about the art with knowledgeable curators. They related to me countless spiritual and life altering experience they had while getting to know these works of art. They understood them enough to feel deeply moved by them. They even loved them tenderly enough to purchase expensive prints so that they could take them home and introduce them to their closest friends. That was something I struggled to comprehend. How do you even begin to develop a love for something that you fear? How do you grow to cherish something that you don't understand?

Paula was taking home a print of a woman at a well to give a friend who had just fallen into financial ruin because the story it depicted once gave her the hope to endure similar trials. Jean stood in front of the image of five African women with tears in her eyes and told me that the story it depicted inspired her to more openly act upon her spiritual faith. And at least five other docents came to my office begging me to get copies of the painting of ten virgins carrying Japanese paper lanterns in the museum store because they just knew that this particular depiction of the Biblical parable would change their teenage daughters' lives.

I listened to them talk about the works of art they really related to for many months, somehow painfully aware that in every instance, it was the narrative of the work of art that endeared them to it. I patiently pointed out to them the artistic elements and techniques that made the expression of that story possible and consoled myself with the same consistent reminder: "They're history buffs, not art majors. They don't think with the mind of an artist."

Late one afternoon, I began to feel particularly suffocated by the historical nature of every project I was involved in. History seemed to be chasing the fine art out of my career, so I went out to the one gallery where I could be totally enveloped in my element: the International Art Competition. My manager was in the gallery selecting from among the exhibited pieces those that would be made into prints for sale in the museum store. "I don't understand those art curators," she said grimacing. "I can't make prints of any of the award winning pieces. Just look at them. No one would ever want to hang those in their living room." I glanced over the list of pieces she had selected as those that would be of interest to the general public and felt so completely stunned by her choices that I let out a dumbfounded giggle.

“You have just made a list of all of the artists that my colleagues in the art community would dismiss as didactic, sentimental, and dull.” I said. “I’m afraid I would never hang one of those paintings in my home.”

“But that’s what our typical visitor prefers to see, Angela. These are the kind of paintings that become popular with the masses because they depict important stories that they hear about every week at church, people and events that they already know and love. It’s what they relate to. They seem simple, but their stories are inspiring.” That year, some of the very same paintings on her list received the visitor’s choice award.

I spent a great deal of time considering my manager’s statement. The particular community our museum catered to was highly educated for sure, but also extremely conservative when it came to the realm of art appreciation. Most art museums can count on the fact that many of their visitors spend time in their galleries because they already have some level of experience with art (Doering & Pekarik, 1996). They already understand and appreciate it for art’s intrinsic value, at least to some extent. But people didn’t visit our museum because they were art experts, or even because they were art appreciators. People visited our museum primarily because it was a memory box of their religious heritage.

That’s when it hit me: They’re not experts in history like my colleagues or some of my docents, but most of our visitors aren’t art people either and so they don’t think like art professionals. Art museum professionals like me enjoy thinking deeply about artwork because we’ve been trained in ways that develop that skill set in us. But, the ability to enjoy viewing and making meaning from art doesn’t just come naturally (Czikszentmihalyi & Robinson, 1990; Henry, 2007). Somehow I had failed to realize that visual interpretation is a learned art and there’s a difference between the information and strategies that experts and non-experts would

rely upon to construct an understanding of a work of art (Hooper-Greenhill, 2000a; Lachapelle, 2007).

There were some humanities majors, artists, or art historians who would walk through the door already knowing how to interpret the visual language, I was sure; but, for the most part, our visitors would not have much art experience. Their priorities and their experiences with art would depend on the experience that they did have. If an engineer tried to understand a painting by applying a mathematical formula, she would assume that the output would not be the meaning we wanted her to derive. And, if a doctor tried to understand a post-impressionist painting through an anatomical lens, he certainly wouldn't recognize in his patient the emotive message we would prescribe. That being the case, I could see how most of our visitors, just like most of our docents, would feel insecure and uncomfortable in their understanding of the art they encountered. I couldn't just expect visitors to know how to interpret art using the strategies I did (Hooper-Greenhill, 2000a). If they already approached the art feeling incompetent and uncomfortable, then learning to appreciate the details beyond the simple storyline wouldn't be a priority (Doering & Pekarik, 1996).

More than ever, I wanted not only for art to be elevated to a position of importance in the museum, but also in the every-day lives of our audiences. I wanted the general visitor to feel empowered to find personal meaning in art. But if they were going to achieve that level of appreciation, then they needed to find in art something that they already knew and felt comfortable with (Doering & Pekarik, 1996). I needed to allow them to approach art with a method of coming to understand the world that they already knew (Hooper-Greenhill, 2000a). I knew that most of them wouldn't be familiar with post-modern theories in art criticism. I didn't know of very many people who would know how to react when confronted with the rules that

give meaning to the formal principles and elements of art. The blunt and honest words of my manager never ceased to echo in my head, “It seems simple, but stories are what they relate to.”

Being an intern, I typically would have been more receptive to her mentoring. But, not only was my manager not an art person, she wasn’t even a museum person. She was a library scientist tasked with integrating the educational efforts of our museum and its sister library. As much as I thought I understood where she was coming from, I also felt absolutely sure that if our visitors could not yet appreciate the depth and content in visual art, it was my job to teach them to. I was determined to maintain my professional integrity and be a stalwart advocate for the discipline of fine art.

To be quite honest, that was becoming more and more difficult every day. I wasn’t entirely sure that I was an art person any more, either. I felt like my passion for art was dwindling. I used to find all of my inspiration in art. The most transformative moments of my life were art centric. But as of late it wasn’t art that kept inspiring change in my life--it was documents and utilitarian objects and historical artifacts. Well, there were a few works of art that I had been moved by lately, but they didn’t count because it was the historical story they depicted that spoke to my soul, not the visual imagery. What was it about the artifacts and the documents and didactic art that had changed me so?

It was the story. In every case, it was the story that changed my life, not the fine art or the material culture.

“Oh no!” I thought one night as I ended the work day. “I’ve become one of them. I’m not an art professional anymore!” That night as I drove home, I desperately searched my heart for signs that the art educator in me was still alive. In an attempt to remind myself of the passion

I once felt for the subject, I tried to remember that first moment when I became converted to the cause of fine art, the first aesthetic experience that made me an “art person”.

At home, I went to my closet and pulled out a picture of the first work of art I could remember that really changed me: the Chinese blue butterfly. It was a simple ink drawing, not expressive or layered with symbolic meaning. It was the epitome of beauty as defined by the Chinese aesthetic, and because of its beauty, to me, a nineteen year old girl, it was sweet and sentimental. And, that’s why I liked it. But it wasn’t the beautiful illustration that forever changed my life. It was the ancient legend it illustrated that touched me, and that was before I knew much at all about art. It was the story that caused me to make art a part of my everyday life.

I wasn’t an art educator yet at that point. I was just barely beginning to reach beyond a very basic level of art appreciation. But, I wouldn’t have considered myself uncomfortable when faced with the opportunity to try to understand art. I was an art appreciator and I already loved interacting with it. I didn’t need narrative training wheels, so why had I allowed the narrative to become primary? Maybe it wasn’t just our art deprived visitors who needed narrative after all. At the Dallas Museum of Art, most of their patrons really do visit because they have an interest in art, so a high percentage of them already feel at ease with the subject when they walk in the door. And yet, in a recent visitor study, even those who described themselves as feeling comfortable looking at most types of art also said that they liked to know about the story portrayed in a work of art (Pitman & Hirzy, 2010).

The reality is that our visitors weren’t really that atypical. Abigail Housen said that no matter what museum you visit, “regardless of cultural or socioeconomic background, viewers understand works of art in predictable patterns, [or] ‘stages’” (Housen, 2007, p. 172). And, at

the first stage of art appreciation development, viewers all become storytellers. All people in the early stages of learning how to interact with art begin by identifying the people and objects portrayed, and then use their imagination to animate the image into an “unfolding drama” (Housen, 2007). That’s why no matter how insecure our docents felt when it came to interpreting art for others, they would naturally respond to the art by relating to it through a story.

That was when I realized that I might have had it all wrong. The historians around me had not relegated art to second class by utilizing it as a storytelling vehicle. We, the art professionals, had condemned early stage art appreciators before they even got a chance to develop their art sensibilities. We limited them by failing to see the value in foundational methods of understanding and refusing to validate any stage of art appreciation development that wasn’t expert.

When the time came for me to actually present that docent triaging seminar on art interpretation, I had decided that “they”, the history museum educators, hadn’t been so far off in their approach to art after all. It was true that most of our docents and visitors were not highly educated in fine art. To them, the art was a means to an end. But, they weren’t necessarily history buffs either. Many of them had just become very dedicated to history over time, and it wasn’t the raw historical facts that had captured their hearts. It was the stories that enchanted them. Perhaps it was I, the lone art advocate, who had a lot to learn from history museum pedagogy and practice.

Not long after I made the decision to suspend my disbelief, I heard about a visitor study in which researchers collected and analyzed adults’ memories of their childhood museum experiences (Reach Advisors, 2010). The most commonly shared memories of museums after

the passage of many years were of experiences that occurred in history museums, natural history museums, and historic sites. What was it that endeared the history museum to people so well that the things they learned made a lasting impression on them? Well, because of the nature of these history based museums, the memories people retained of their childhood museum visits were commonly narrative based (Norris, Tout-Smith, & Wilkening, 2011). Not everyone responds well to historic fact. Unfortunately, not everyone inherently knows how to interpret visual art, but everyone knows how to interact with a narrative.

Using Stories to Interpret Art

It wasn't until I was asked to teach the docent training course on artifact interpretation that I began to understand why people responded so well to the history approach. I'd been through four years of training to perfect my art interpretation skills, but I was not a trained historian. I'd never been formally taught how to interpret artifacts and the thought of teaching something foreign to me had me in an absolute panic. I'd read all the principles countless times, identified my central theme, collected PowerPoint images of all my artifacts, and tried to commit my historical facts to memory, but when I practiced my presentation, it gave me flashbacks to boring, tedious auditorium lectures and slide projectors. I needed practice, I needed artifacts I knew a lot about, and I needed to have the real object there for the demonstration. But I didn't have much time.

Before I even realized what I was doing, I had run around my apartment and collected a substantial pile of my own personal "artifacts". They weren't museum quality, and they weren't historic, but they were real objects I could tote into the lecture hall, and they would suffice for the purposes of demonstrations. I had collected my grandmother's military cap and a trick box she'd been given by a friend in Japan during World War II. I'd collected my grandfather's old

welding jacket from his days at the city steel mill and the blue prints from the house he'd lived in for sixty years. I had an old pair of shoes that could tell the story of my travels around the world, and a wooden carving I'd picked up in Africa.

It wasn't history that I'd collected, not really. It was just my personal history, I guess. But my intent wasn't to teach them content. My job was to teach them how to take a lot of disparate objects and link them together conceptually with a theme that visitors would find personally relevant. That would be easy using these objects. I already knew what stories made them really important. I'd told them a hundred times. I already knew what universal takeaway messages the stories behind them could be boiled down to. I'd already discovered how all the stories tied together, because together they kind of defined who I was.

"So, maybe I'm not a trained historian," I thought, "But, I seem to be a natural. I've been interpreting my own personal artifacts for my whole life; I just never realized that's what I was doing. I was destined for this job!"

Still feeling very self-assured, I rushed off to work and set up my own mini-exhibit in the auditorium. I delivered what I considered to be a stunning presentation, and then still basking in the pride of my own personal genius, I decided to do something a little different and fun with the weekly homework assignment. I asked each docent to go and write a tour of their own personal museum artifacts that were lying around their home. I told them that it would be difficult to think of their every-day objects as artifacts, but promised them that they would learn a lot through the process.

The next week, when I collected docent assignments, my confidence was totally deflated. It had been an easy, and even fun, assignment for them. Apparently I wasn't just some kind of prodigy. They were all naturals, too!

As it turns out, all people are “natural narrators” (Frykman, 2009). Stories are our most fundamental means of learning, not just in the sense that we remember things better when they’re presented in the form of a story. We naturally interpret all of our past experiences by telling stories (Bruner, 1990; Bruner, 1996). As we’re trying to make sense of the world around us on a daily basis, we inherently use skills similar to a historian’s research strategy to construct a narrative that makes things meaningful to us because historians also use narratives to make sense of the world (Bedford, 2001; Silverman, 1993). The experience I had with my docents made so much more sense to me as Lois Silverman (1993) explained it:

Like history, making meaning of objects is something we do all the time, not just in museums and not just those of us who get paid for it...we reminisce about them, imagine and fantasize with them, worship and revere them, treat them as symbols, react unconsciously to them, and use them to tell stories to others...people relate to objects as symbolic of values and mnemonic of stories that express those values....families use their possessions to symbolize important people and events and pass on family values embedded in stories. (p. 9)

The next week, I returned home from docent training carrying an armload of two-dimensional galleries pieced together with photographs of artifacts found in each of their respective homes. I was in the middle of reading through a tour outline that accompanied one of them, when I happened to glance up at the work of art hanging on the wall above my head.

“That one could go in my gallery,” I thought. “I need to start keeping a catalog of all of the art in my personal collection, because after I’m gone, no one will understand the stories that make my works of art so poignantly meaningful unless I write them down.”

What had I just done? Had *I* just identified one of my masterpieces as an artifact? Yes! I absolutely had. I jumped up and started walking from wall to wall, taking inventory of every work of art I owned. There was not a single work of art I owned because of its own intrinsic value. Every piece had a story attached to it that couldn't be readily seen by observing it, and which the artist of the work would never know. Every single piece was a part of my collection because of a personally significant story that was meaningful in the context of my past. Likewise, they were all stories that I told and re-told to help teach profound truths or to remind myself of great lessons I'd learned.

“What?! What kind of an art educator am I? Here I am, the professional art educator, and all my life, I've been looking at my own art like a historian!” Just to be sure, I walked myself through each of the stories one at a time...stories I'd been collecting from high school through college, and every day since until I finally finished with the work of art I'd just presented as a story the previous week. My entire life, I'd been appreciating art narratively. I'd been finding narrative in art that was not just didactic and illustrative. Many of these pieces were collected before my history museum days, but after I'd been well trained. I was not just a novice still struggling with Housen's first stage of development, but even as an “expert” living every waking moment of my day at the re-creative stage (Housen, 2007). It was all so prosaic. What was I, some kind of art school flunky?

Well, not according to some pretty prominent museum educators. It's just that before I was an art educator, I was a human being; therefore, first and foremost, a storyteller. Whenever we are introduced to anything new—be it art, science, mathematics, or a choice encounter at the grocery store, we use stories to make meaning (Falk & Dierking, 2000). The crux is that whether

we like it or not, the way that we as human beings make sense of our past, our present, and our future will influence our interpretation of art (Silverman, 1993).

Museums are in the business of helping visitors make meaning of art and artifacts. But for humans, storytelling is central to meaning making. Most humans do that as a part of their every-day lives. It doesn't matter whether they're history people, art people, museum professionals, visitors, or even the people who have never set foot in a museum at all. It's integral to life. We make sense of all objects narratively, including fine art. So, why was I trying to un-teach an interpretive strategy that is already inherent in every human being instead of trying to build upon it?

By the time docent training rolled around again two years later, I had decided to take seriously Lois Silverman's advice when she advised all museums to be willing to learn great interpretive lessons from the field of history. Her argument was this (1993):

Many of these ways of relating to objects are typically deemed "naïve" and inappropriate behavior in museums. Yet our own experiences and recent research attest to the fact that such behaviors can be integral parts of the museum experience, important and satisfying to many visitors. As in the case of history, it seems that understanding the range of ways that people make meaning of objects and using that broadened spectrum as the basis for museum programs and exhibits can open the door to more democratic practices in museums. Understanding the many ways we make meaning of objects in our culture may in fact help us see a wider range of behaviors that museums could be supporting and promoting. (p. 9)

My first docent training lecture was entitled "Using Art in Tours: Storytelling Made Easy". It was essentially about how to use art to help tell a historical story. The second time around, I had

altered the training course drastically, and called it “Using Art In Tours: Learning to See the Story”.

The last two years of my narrative exploration had taught me that I really only had three main goals, and those goals were not the dissemination of art historical content.

1. I wanted to develop in our visitors the “skill” of finding pleasure in thinking deeply about works of art on a daily basis (Henry, 2007).
2. I wanted our visitors to have “transformative” or “aha!” moments with works of art in our galleries (Bedford, 2001).
3. I wanted visitors to have the kind of “empathic” response to art that will find a long term place in their hearts (DuToit, 2011).

After puzzling for ten years over the question of how to help others have a transformative experience through interactions with art, I had finally come to resonate with the sentiments of museum professional Leslie Bedford when she said, “Inevitably, I’ve learned that ‘transformative experiences’ are as hard to create as they are to define, but I have become increasingly convinced that storytelling often lies at the heart of them” (2001, p. 28). I had learned that the skill of deep thinking about art could be developed in others by providing them with historical content that was enhanced with a social context, connections to universal emotions, and an element of the imagination: all elements found in stories. And, after all of this learning, I had finally come to a conclusion that would be very eloquently articulated two years later by educator Herman DuToit.

It was the philosophy upon which I constructed a new docent training course. It’s an art criticism methodology I learned from a history museum. It is a technique I watch visitors employ unknowingly every day. And, it is a philosophy that I continue to promote:

If we want to engage our visitors with a work of art, we should try to build a story around it. People relate to stories because they can identify with them. Stories always have an affective dimension that involve people and that can evoke an empathic response. It is this empathic response that often finds a permanent place in people's hearts—whereas cognitive information is easily forgotten from the mind.” (Du Toit, 2011)

Making the Story About Them

It was the kitchen timer in the hand of the docent standing next to me that finally brought me back into the gallery and reminded my brain that I had reality to attend to. Three short beeps: one to get my attention, one to wipe the glazed-over and distant look out of my eyes, and one to jump-start my vocal chords. It was action time and I had to be prepared to evaluate the mini-tour I'd been observing. I invited the other docents in the group to offer some peer feedback as I hastily jotted down a few bits of constructive feedback on my clip board. I offered my final encouraging words of praise, offered some helpful pointers on techniques that might improve the presentation, and gave a final group pep talk.

I had evaluated twenty mini-tours in the last three hours. My legs were suffering from museum fatigue and my brain felt numb. I dismissed the docents, gathered my evaluation forms, and climbed the sleepy after-hours escalator to my office. Usually by 9:30 pm, I just want to skirt past the office directly to the car and just head home. But instead, I collapsed in my chair and sat silently in the darkness. It wasn't my mind that felt numb, as much as my heart.

I had seen this group of docents make progress, I mustn't forget that. But something just wasn't working right. I re-played the last twelve weeks of docent training trying to assess what I had left out. I taught them to think thematically, to draw connections between all of the works they addressed on a tour and make sure that the interpretation of each contributed to one unifying

idea or message that would connect the art to the visitor's life (Sweney, 2007). Then, I tried to instill in them the importance of learning to "read art as a moment from a story" and construct a story from visual observation, rather than just using the work of art as a background illustration in front of which they became storytellers (Bedford, 2001). I had taught them how to identify three different kinds of stories that they could construct around a work of art:

1. The story inside the frame: I taught them to begin discussing the narrative that can be readily observed in the work. Then, I showed them how to begin to expand upon the story by helping visitors look closely at the piece and analyze the formal qualities that might add additional clues about the people, setting, mood, or event, further describing what was happening in the moment.
2. The story outside the frame: I taught them how to piece together a narrative based on art historical information that would set the scene for the work of art and describe the context and circumstance surrounding its existence. We talked about the story of the artist and the cultural/historical story.
3. The story of the viewer: Ultimately, I taught them that the most important story they could address was the story of the viewer. We discussed post-modern attitudes toward the validity of viewer interpretation. Above all else, I tried to instill in them the importance of drawing out of the visitor any stories that might explain how they would interpret the work. I emphasized the idea that the interpretation of a work of art is not complete until the visitor has interpreted it from his or her own perspective (Burnham & Kai-Kee, 2007). I made it very clear that the visitor must be invited to think through their own ideas about the work of art before their creative assessment was hindered by hearing what would be viewed as the "absolute truth" coming from the mouths of docent experts.

Finally, I remembered very clearly teaching them just a few weeks ago the importance of inquiry. We had a great discussion about the importance of engaging visitors through questioning techniques and the importance of allowing them to become participants in telling the story. I had demonstrated for them a questioning technique that I had developed based on the visual thinking strategies of Abigail Housen (2007) which was sure to help them guide the visitor through a series of questions that would help them find the details of the story in the work of art one step at a time. I thought that it was all there. Certainly, we'd found the right mix of techniques that would help turn our interpretive techniques into something much more meaningful than a standard gallery tour. This interpretive strategy had all the right components to make it capable of achieving my goals.

So, why did every docent-guided tour I had just evaluated feel like a traditional “dreaded art history tour”? The narratives were supposed to help personalize the message. It wasn't because the docents weren't trying to apply the techniques I'd taught them. They did, and many of them even did it with an animated, fun, and inviting flair. But, in my pretend role as an observing visitor, it still felt like a gallery lecture: some know-it-all docent spewing forth a series of long, drawn out stories about something that didn't matter much to me, and they asked the occasional token question to let me know they remembered I was there. But I couldn't see myself in the story. Something about it still wasn't personal enough to constitute a “transformative”, “empathic”, “skill” building experience.

Two days later I found myself sitting in the education team meeting, mentally preparing myself to explain to the team that after some formative assessment, I felt the need to adapt the last few weeks of our docent training course curriculum. I carefully explained that I didn't feel like we could move on to new curriculum until we had re-taught a few concepts. Other members

of the team had been around much longer than I had, and having worked with this docent program for almost twenty years, they confirmed my worst fear: the docent performance on the evaluation tours we'd just conducted was under-impressive. Only they took it a bit farther: these docents were failing because the curriculum was different from years past.

Then I was given a little advice, "They're actually just doing exactly what you've taught them so well to do. They're giving theme-based tours and they're telling stories. They are so focused on that right now, that they are completely leaving out the object and the historical content."

I was also reminded of the mantra of one of our more experienced senior educators. "Remind them that this is a Mu-SEE-um. It's not a Mu-HEAR-um, a Mu-TALK-um, or a Mu-DO-um. People come here to see the objects and that's what you need to focus on instead of getting all caught up in some story, idea or message that exists outside of the object. They need to keep their themes focused on history, not some other message. They need to be taught how to focus on the object and the content related to it, not the story."

I'd become accustomed to hearing this opinion voiced. But, it was the first time it was vocalized so emphatically.

I asked what I could do to help them better understand how to construct a story around the work of art so that the primary focus would remain on the object. No one could quite pinpoint any specific suggestions except to say that art was much easier to interpret than artifacts and all they had to do was get people to look at the work of art and then talk about it.

I spent the next three days in front of the computer trying to figure out how to make the necessary course corrections to bring our docents back from the radical detour I'd taken them on

and set them on the right track. While I knew that was what my boss expected of me, I still had a lot of confidence in the path I'd decided to take and I was hoping to find some middle ground.

I could understand the importance of the work of art itself. I'd spent my entire life and career studying works of art because I valued them. I would never want to take the "see" out of the Mu-SEE-um. But I was of a mind that agreed more with the philosophy of Eilean Hooper-Greenhill and believed that "putting things out on display for visitors to learn through looking is no longer enough to achieve the educational purposes of museums" (2007, p. 13). I just felt that the object and the story should be integral to one another and that they should work together to express a message that could be easily personalized.

After listening to them speak, I understood that there would always be visitors who preferred a very traditional content and object oriented tour. I knew that there would always be people who visited because of the intrinsic value they saw in the work of art itself and because they were very interested in the art historical content. It would be important for me to remember to address the needs of those visitors as well (Gurian, 2006). And, they were right, the docents needed to learn how to more intimately tie the stories they shared to the object or work of art itself and how to focus attention on the piece by using it to tell the story.

But, I felt like my colleagues thought that my educational philosophy was directly opposed to their approach, and I thought we had a responsibility to try to add a little more to the experience for those who were looking for a more personal experience. It didn't have to be an either/or philosophy (Gurian, 2006). I didn't want to just teach my docents how to teach people. I wanted to teach them how to help visitors find personal significance in the art we shared with them (Roberts, 1997). I was suffering from an intense desire to bring the museum with me into

the philosophical realm of the twenty-first century, but knew I needed to be wary of overstepping my bounds.

In three days' time, all I was able to come up with was a lot of rationale supporting what contemporary educators were calling the "new art museum education" (Mayer, 2007). I had discovered that many museum scholars had been trying to move in a similar direction to my own philosophy, some of them for more than ten years. They called for education practices that were "designed to empower visitors, to foster museum literacy" (Mayer, 2007, p. 44). They suggested that museum education "move away from teaching about collections toward the purposeful integration of meaning making within life's social fabric" (p. 43). They determined that new art museum educational practices would need to "focus on the visitor's subjective interpretation of objects" (p. 43). Their call to action energized my soul. It required that the visitor play a prominent role in the selecting and the telling of our stories.

The "new art museum education" was about more than just making museums audience centered and accessible. Advocates for a new educational philosophy were making the statement that the stories of our art and artifacts were not the only stories that needed to be told. They said that every visitor came to the museum with their own "entrance narrative" (Falk & Dierking, 2000; Roberts, 2007). Each one started their visit with their own, unique storyline and because of that, they would all approach a work of art with a different perspective. Each individual would make their own meaning of the art they viewed based on their own personal narrative and the context they brought to the work of art, and that wouldn't always agree with the narrative we shared with them about the work of art (Greenhill, 2007; Roberts, 2007; Silverman, 1983).

The idea intrigued me. They had stories to share, too, and those stories were important in a museum context. If that was true, then I felt a focus on the visitor's story became so much

more important because it would affect what they were learning and what the rest of us could learn from them as well. And if we could help them find something they connected personally with in a work of art, they would have a new story to tell to others (Simon, 2010).

If I had been bolder, I would have walked into the following day's docent training quoting art educator Lisa Roberts (1997) as she defined a new art museum educational philosophy:

No longer are [works of art] ends in and of themselves so much as vehicles for the expression of ideas....Now [works of art] are being used to represent a host of meanings, from personal interpretations to social issues...Clearly, museums are no longer object-based institutions in the traditional sense of the term—except insofar as objects serve as the conveyers of ulterior ideas and experiences. Rather they are idea-, experience-, and narrative-based institutions—forums for the negotiation and the renegotiation of meaning. (p. 147)

If I had been a little more brave, I would have stood on that stage and, echoing the words of Nina Simon (2010), I would have implored them to look forward with a new vision: “Imagine looking at an object not for its artistic or historical significance but for its ability to spark conversation”(127).

If I had not been so afraid of being labeled a prima donna, I would have confidently pushed forward with my original training plan. I would have stood by my belief that the museum should not be about the object, but about ideas that could be effectively built up around the foundation of a work of art in a narrative format. But, I would have added to the idea that these stories ultimately must be visitor-centric (Bedford, 2001). I would have shifted the focus to be more visitor-based so that docents could help ordinary people find personal relevance in the

stories our art had to share. I would have found ways to ensure that visitors were hearing the stories that were important to them and that they had an opportunity to share their own.

But I was just barely beginning to get an inkling of what a tremendous paradigm shift our staff would have to make in order for us to initiate a new art museum education model, and being a relatively new hire, I didn't feel like it was the right time to fight the battle. I was still planning my lesson at home at midnight the night before the training and I'd found no diplomatic solution. So, the next afternoon I stood behind the podium, asked my trainees to focus their thematic tours on historical content, and delivered a lecture on strategies for directing the visitor's attention to the work of art. When I concluded my lesson that day, I stepped into the auditorium wings, took a deep breath and promised myself that just as soon as my masters' thesis was finished, I'd begin researching ways to give the visitor a leading role in the narrative. I'd figure out a way to make the stories about them.

Making the Story about Me

Throughout the entire course of my expeditions into the educational world of story, I was supposed to be writing a masters' thesis. The only trouble was that my work schedule demanded far more than forty hours a week and left no room in my life to do any research. At least that's what I thought. My experiences at work had taught me one thing, though. Just like the visitors I was trying to educate, I learn most effectively through narrative experiences. The only problem was that I knew writing a narrative thesis would require a great deal of justification. I'd been sitting on that thesis for three years and it was becoming a leaden albatross around my neck. As soon as the four month training was complete and the docent trainees had been graduated and turned loose in the galleries, I took advantage of a little extra time and began to write my chapter on methodology. This is what I wrote:

Chapter Three Preface

Dear Reader,

When the time arrived for me to formalize my study of story and gear my learning toward an academic thesis, making the transition to a scholarly research methodology required quite a steep learning curve. The following chapter is an account of my long search for a research methodology that would fulfill my needs as a student, as a museum educator, and as a human being.

This chapter was originally intended to be my methodology chapter. I began writing it in a format that would outline the experiences through which I first discovered that stories really were the key component of a recognized scholarly research practice referred to as narrative. Then, I related the story of a complex internal struggle through which I came to feel like the selection of a narrative methodology was essential to my particular research topic. It explains why it is an appropriate technique to be used for conducting research in the field of museum education.

Part way through this chapter, you will encounter a twist in the story that snuck up on me quite unexpectedly. During the writing process, this methodology chapter became a little different from most because in the midst of writing my text, my explanation of *how* I intended to study transformed into a key component of the study itself.

I discovered a museum educational theory also referred to as “narrative” and realized for the first time that there was a connection between narrative theory and the story-based interpretive practices I was exploring in the art museum. You will see a shift in my thought processing as I began to consider the possibility that the concepts advocated by my research methodology might also provide some of the answers to my research question. I was not able to gain a complete understanding of what that connection really was until after this chapter was

written, but that moment of provocation became the impetus for my insistence that I needed to develop a research methodology that truly reflected my purposes as a museum educator and met the demands of my professional practice.

At the conclusion of this chapter, you will be introduced to my own variation on narrative inquiry, a unique blend of several different practices specially designed for my use as a researcher within the field of museum education. My detailed explanation of how I designed this research methodology may seem to be tangential and of little consequence to those who expected this methodology chapter to be a mere summary of a standard practice I intended to follow. But, when I began to ponder the connection between subject and methodology, every detail of my reasoning became essential data for you to know because it began to alter my understanding of my research topic.

The purposes of this chapter have become two-fold: to introduce my research methodology and to capture content. So, please read with extra attention. This internal conflict is not just a bunch of personal prose. It will affect the rest of the story.

My Narrative Methodology

“Our consideration of life at the boundary between thinking narratively and thinking formalistically leads us to highlight several tensions....One of the central tensions at this boundary is the place of theory in inquiry. Formalists begin inquiry in theory, whereas narrative inquirers tend to begin with experience as expressed in lived and told stories....We see something similar in our work with beginning narrative inquirers, as they, too, turn to exposition of theoretical frames to position and begin their inquiries.”

(Connelly and Clandinin, 2000, p. 40-41)

Having completed the following chapters which serve as a rationale for and an outline of my research methodologies, I have looked back on the process and become painfully aware that as a researcher I have done exactly what I promised myself I would not do. I fell victim to the temptation that Connelly and Clandinin describe so many of their students suffer from. I gave in to the cultural tension which creates in me the sense of a demand for a rigorous analytical justification and defense of my chosen narrative methodology.

I set out to write a seamless narrative research text, and continually found myself stymied as my writing style gravitated back toward a dry, formalistic writing style. When I have felt myself begin to stray from the literary form I tried to maintain, I have stopped and started, thrown away and started over. In spite of my consistent efforts to backtrack and revise, I still ended up with a text that is more formal than narrative. I have always been of a narrative mindset, in fact in all course work assignments possible, I wrote in a creative literary style. But, in spite of my personality, I still come from formalistic tradition that echoes in my head: “this is a serious scholarly work, and must be approached in a formal manner beginning with and justified by theory.”

At this stage in the development of narrative inquiry as a scholarly format, I really should not have to justify it as a valid methodology. But, despite my determination to jump right into a beautifully crafted seamless text and gracefully make a narrative transition, I still struggle to make a complete paradigm shift. My supposed integration of seamless content is still very clunky and awkward. In the true spirit of narrative learning, I have stopped re-writing and started watching how my research and writing style changes as I become more practiced and familiar with the process. Hopefully, by the end of my thesis writing experience I, like much of the scholarly world, will have effectively made the narrative turn.

Discovering Narrative

“What about that big box? Is it ready to go?” he asked. “It looks like the last one, and we still have plenty of room.”

“Oh, that one requires special care. It goes in the back seat of the car, not in the truck,” I said, pausing to stare at the bold words written in heavy black permanent marker:

IMPORTANT. MOVE IN CAR. I took one last look around my dimly lit basement apartment for anything else at all to pack up. Then, with a sigh and a grunt, I hefted the big box and handed it off to one of the men.

“WOW! That one’s heavy! What’s it got in it, books?” he asked.

“It’s my thesis.”

“All of it?”

“Plus two more boxes. As soon as we’re done lugging all of this to the new apartment, that’s the next big load to carry.”

In the time that I lived in that apartment, I collected countless file folders full of research information. They stacked up in towering piles in the corner of my bedroom until walking

around them became difficult, and then more books and binders slowly multiplied until they filled up the entire top shelf of my book case. In three years' time, I have accumulated enough literature to fill the entire back seat of my car on moving day. And, I have only actually written fewer than ten pages.

There are a lot of reasons why this project has taken me so long. I've changed my research topic five times in an effort to narrow my focus so that I can pick up the pace. Every new topic has come with an impressive pile of literature review and another brick wall. I've never been lacking in passion for any of my topics or the will to jump in and begin to learn. It just happens that no matter how motivated I am to learn and no matter how much information is accessible, I cannot begin any kind of organized, scholarly research without a guiding research methodology. And when it comes right down to it, I need to be able to conduct research in a way that I most effectively learn.

I've done quite a bit of book study over the last three years as I've looked into a variety of different methodologies, each seeming to be a good fit for a particular research topic. I've looked into surveys, focus groups, and curriculum based approaches. Finally, an insightful professor who had been observing as I studied and learned from course to course over the years, steered me toward a methodology that he felt fit my own personal learning practice perfectly. It was personalized, it was story based, and it would allow me to think outside the box. It was a method that looked very much like the unique flair I had imposed upon all of the assignments given me in my coursework.

I was hesitant, at first, to venture away from more traditional and standard research practices. I suppose that my own personal paradigm kept me rooted in what I considered to be more "serious" academic studies that would identify me as a "true scholar". But, as I began to

read and really study out the different narrative philosophies, I began to identify very deeply with a narrative research methodology, not only as an individual, but as a scholar and as a museum education professional.

In his advocacy for emerging practices in art-based research, art therapist Shaun McNiff (1998) asserts that researchers should take a look at the actual day-to-day practices internal to their professions and identify models for research that actually apply their line of thinking and expertise, and with that sentiment I concur.

Finding A Museum Methodology

Within the world of museum education we already have many tried and true methodologies, both quantitative and qualitative, that are frequently used to conduct audience needs research: focus groups, surveys, interviews, segmentation studies, behavioral mapping, and visitor tracing (Falk, 2009; Binks & Uzzell, 2001; Dawson & Jensen, 2011; Hein, 2001; Russell, 2001). But, as I read the most extensive publication that D. Jean Clandinin and F. Michael Connelly (2000) wrote on narrative based inquiry, I frequently encountered the concept that individuals should study in the same way that they learn—and that includes specialists studying and learning within a specific discipline. As I reflected upon that idea, a recurring thought began to affect all of my research plans, and it was one that I could not shake: none of those more traditional research methodologies would allow me to apply the learning practices that I preach.

“As a professional museum educator,” I thought, “I am immersed in a world of ‘meaning making’. I approach every day, every exhibition, and every visitor experience with a core set of assumptions regarding the educational philosophy of my working world and those beliefs permeate everything I do. These core values, a compilation of contemporary scholarly

philosophies regarding the way that people most effectively learn, seem so intuitive to me now that I take them for granted; and yet, I have failed to recognize them as valid methodologies for my own learning processes.” Every day, I taught other people using a basic understanding that effective learning is:

Experiential

Human beings construct knowledge by making sense out of their lived experiences. Because everyone carries with them a unique set of personal experiences to build knowledge upon, each individual’s internal learning process and the outcome of understanding will be different. When different individuals encounter the same experience, each will also internalize and learn from the experience differently as they place it within the context of their prior personal understanding. Effective learning fosters the forging of relationships between personal experiences and new information or studies (Falk & Dierking, 1992, 2002; Dierking, 2002; Hooper-Greenhill, 2000b, 2000c, 2007).

Constructive

Knowledge does not simply exist outside the learner. Learners construct knowledge for themselves based upon their own prior knowledge and their social interactions with the people and environment surrounding them. The development of knowledge occurs on a continuum over time and our understanding is continually evolving and changing. Therefore, no one version of “truth” can be considered conclusive or privileged over any other and conclusions reached by the learner must be validated based upon the internal context of individual understanding rather than an external standard of “truth” (Hein, 1998).

Interpretive

As learners make meaning of their experiences, they make sense of things through the continual and infinite process of interpretation. Even when they are provided with an interpretation of an object, experience, or narrative, viewers construct their own understanding of the world around them based on the context of their lives. Interpretive learning takes place within four equally valued experiential contexts: the personal, the sociocultural, the physical, and the continuum of time. Interpretive learning is influenced by the entire human experience. Because it is founded on the holistic human, experience interpretations are subjective (Falk & Dierking, 1992, 2000, 2005; Hooper-Greenhill, 1994, 1999, 2000a, 2000c, 2007).

Participatory

In a participatory educational experience, learners can “create, share, and connect with each other around content. *Create* means that [learners] contribute their own ideas, objects, and creative expression....*Share* means that people discuss, take home, remix, and redistribute both what they see and what they make....*Connect* means that [learners] socialize with other people who share their particular interests (Simon, 2009, preface).” Participatory learning is personalized, and includes the learner’s perspective. It is directly relevant to the learner’s personal life. It’s diverse enough to include multiple stories and voices and is often co-created. Above all else, participatory learning involves making, doing, and creating. (Simon, 2009)

I very distinctly remember the day I realized that the ideologies of narrative research methodologies are perfectly aligned with contemporary museum education philosophies. I was sitting in my big blue oversized chair reading Jean Clandinin and Michael Connelly’s book on narrative inquiry (2000) and I felt my heart begin to bounce up and down in my chest. I jumped up out of my chair and began pacing with my book. I was so energized by the similarities I

found in this book that I began reading passages aloud to my roommate. For the first time in a great while, I felt the passion for my studies swell up again inside me. I found all of the same philosophies explained in different terminology. Narrative based research is also:

Experiential

Narrative methodologies of research were heavily influenced by the writings of John Dewey on experience as education. They are founded upon the belief that we learn by making meaning of the experiences we encounter. These methods assume that we understand our experiences narratively and we share our experiences with others in a narrative format. Early in the development of their Narrative theories, Connelly and Clandinin stated, "...Humans are storytelling organisms who...lead stories lives. The study of narrative, therefore, is the study of the ways humans experience the world (1990, p. 2)." They later stated, "Experience happens narratively. Narrative inquiry is a form of narrative experience. Therefore, educational experience should be studied narratively...Narrative inquiry is a way of understanding experience (2000, p. 19-20)."

Constructive

According to narrative theory, all things must be understood within a context. The "truths" to be learned about anything cannot be applied to all contexts; therefore the narrative of one person's experience cannot be reduced nor generalized to explain or identify the experiences of other individuals. It is important to consider the circumstance of each person's unique experiences. However, the context of an individual's experience extends beyond their personal circumstance. "Experience is both personal and social. Both the personal and the social are always present," explained Clandinin and Connelly (2000, p. 2). In essence, we must all be

understood in relation to others because what we learn is co-constructed through social interactions (Hollingsworth & Dybdahl, 2007).

In addition, “life is experienced on a continuum” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 19) and therefore our understanding of a person or thing changes as time passes and context changes. The theory states that the experiences of the present were constructed by the past and will influence the future. Narrative thought processes allow knowledge to be altered and re-constructed over time. The context around an understanding of a person or event consists of “interaction” (personal and social), “continuity” (over time), and “situation” (place); the very same contextual factors around which museum education theory construct the experience of a visitor.

Interpretive

“In narrative thinking,” stated Clandinin and Connelly, “there is an interpretive pathway between action and meaning mapped out in terms of narrative (2000, p. 31). Narrative theory asserts that all people are in a constant state of “becoming”. We are all engaged in a process of personal change and are continually seeking to make meaning of our individual experiences and to understand them in the context of our lives. Often, in narrative inquiry, both the interpretive voice of the researcher and the voices of all of those researched are present in the research text because each will view the same experience through different eyes due to their present contexts and personal understandings. Because the personal, social, and time dimensions of context influence our understanding, all interpretations can be otherwise. A narrative inquiry is the exploration of one possible answer out of many.

Participatory

Just as in museum participatory learning, narrative inquiry is very personalized, and in this case includes the researcher's perspective. Most narrative inquiries grow out of a personal narrative that has fostered a particular interest in the researcher. The researcher is encouraged to be transparent by sharing the background of their personal narrative context with the reader before interpreting research. The individual observing, interviewing, or recording also plays an active role in the social environment and participates in the experience being analyzed.

Narrative research is a "collaboration between researcher and participants" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 20). Participatory learning also includes making, doing, and creating, and narrative inquiry is unique in that it embraces a variety of creative methods for collecting field text narratives and encourages researchers to share their explorations with others through a myriad of creative forms of research texts.

After making my comparison between narrative methodologies of "research" and museum "learning" theories, I came to understand that as a scholarly researcher, I am no different than the ordinary museum learner. As human beings, we all understand our experiences narratively within our own contexts of social interaction, time, and place. As an individual, I have been studying the world narratively for my entire life: the theories behind narrative inquiry are core to my personality. Even as a museum educator, I teach narratively. So, in prelude to providing an explanation of how I intend to conduct and write my research, I proclaim with a multitude of other narrative inquirers:

"We might say that if we understand the world narratively, as we do, then it makes sense to study the world narratively" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 17).

Recognizing an Exemplar

I was excited to learn that many fields of study had taken up the charge to study as they learn, and had begun to endorse a twenty-first century development as contemporary as narrative research, until I realized that it's not really a recent innovation at all (Riessman, 2008). Narrative inquiry has long been cross-disciplinary and has an extended history in the social sciences. The methodology can claim roots in many of the social sciences, such as: literature, history, anthropology, sociolinguistics, sociology, psychology, psychiatry, and the humanities. But narrative studies can also claim the field of education as one of its progenitors (Cresswell, 2007; Clandinin & Connelly, 1990).

Coming from a traditional world in which research is often defined as objective and quantitative, I was intrigued when I read that autobiography as narrative was actually one of the first methodologies to be used for research in the field of education (Clandinin & Connelly, 1990). The very personal nature of autobiography seemed much more subjective, narrow, and affective in nature than the scholarly world would sanction for my thesis. But, I also discovered that narrative studies are becoming much more prominent in the contemporary practices of researchers in education.

For some time the paramount question asked in most inquiries into the practice of education was “*How do we effectively educate?*” Professional educators, beginning to understand the role of the individual in constructing knowledge, are increasingly beginning to instead ask the question, “*What does it mean to learn?*” Narrative is very useful to educators exploring how knowledge is constructed because personal stories or narratives provide a deeper understanding of “the whole person, the whole human life, in all of its ambiguous, messy, beautiful detail (Freeman, 2007, p. 134). Researchers are beginning to value narrative because it

relays a holistic human experience that is not reduced or generalized and can offer insight into how learning takes place in the human experience that more objective methods of research cannot afford (Riessman, 2007).

I have often found the museum field to be more formal and traditional than the rest of the world of general education, and perhaps that's why I assumed that museum educators were a little behind in the movement toward narrative based research. I was engaged in an effort to collect all the rationale I could to appropriate a methodology from outside the field when I came across the following assertion by Julia Rose (2007). "Increasingly," she states, "museum educators are following a similar path traversed by curriculum theorists to transform and expand theoretical groundwork toward humanistic, affective, and personalized education (p. 50)." When I began to understand that these two branches of education share common goals in their efforts to understand learning, I also came to the realization that we, as museum educators are also beginning to give precedence to the question, "**How do individuals learn?**"

The interests of museum educators currently trend toward the role of the visitor in constructive learning, so we likewise seek more humanistic ways to understand our visitors and our educational role in the world. The museum field is beginning to adopt research and assessment strategies from the social sciences that are more qualitative in nature and are primarily shared through narrative texts (Hein, 2001). So, instead of seeking to build an argument for looking outside of the field, I began looking for evidence that narrative based inquiry was a methodology of my field.

I have not yet encountered very much research in museum studies that was conducted and collected in a narrative manner. Many have made a valiant effort to engage in narrative based studies. I've seen many reports that are written in a narrative literary style, but few that

employed narrative methods of inquiring before the final text was written. I found one prime example that represents the kind of research Jean Clandinin and Michael Connelly acquainted me with as applied to the discipline of museum education: Lisa Roberts' narrative research text entitled "From Knowledge to Narrative: Educators and the Changing Museum" (1997).

The day I discovered her book sandwiched between Falk and Greenhill on a dusty library shelf was a pivotal moment in my education and my career. There, in my hand, was published proof that narrative methods of research belonged within the scholarly world of the museum field. Museum educators were studying narratively before I ever looked outside of the discipline for a means of studying the way I learn, and hopefully the practice will eventually become common in the field. Not many educators have read the works of Lisa Roberts. I had never heard her name before that day. As far as I can tell, she was the only scholar who wrote about narrative theory in museum education. But, after reading her book, I have begun to recognize the work Lisa Roberts cited in many texts as being influential in the history of museum education theory. Her theories were cited next to those of John Falk and George Hein, so why was it that no one seemed to be familiar with her philosophies?

I'm not sure why a study so important to the past is so overlooked in the present. Perhaps she entered the scene before her time in the grand narrative of museum education, or perhaps she simply set the context for future learners to build upon. I don't really know. But, I do know that when the historical narrative of the theories she promoted collided with the story of my contemporary life, it had a tremendous impact on the future of my own research.

Seeing the Study as the Subject

I have always loved reading about museum education theory and practice. It energizes me and re-kindles my enthusiasm. This much is true. But, I didn't just read "From Knowledge

to Narrative” the same way that I have read the rest of the literature in my collection. I pored over it, pondered it ceaselessly, and talked about it incessantly. The subject of Lisa Roberts’ study and the focus of her report was a topic I felt very passionately about, to be sure. But more important to me than the content of the book was the relationship between her method of research and the phenomenon she explored, because her research methodology was also her subject of study. She was learning narratively about what it means to learn narratively.

I never intended to study narrative theories in museum education. I had settled on something related to the connection between art therapy and museums. But sometimes, the direction of our research cannot be determined by a decision about what to study, a hypothesis, or a question. Sometimes, the focus of our research is born of the writing process as we stumble upon new knowledge that we never could have dreamed existed and begin to ask questions of a much greater magnitude (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2008).

It was my efforts to understand a research methodology to apply to my original topic that directed me to explore the relationship between narrative methods of research and museum learning. That is how I became aware that there really was already a narrative theory of museum education in existence...and that awareness shed enlightenment upon a question I had long been grappling with as an educator: “How does the story of a work of art help people make meaning in their lives?” I began to resonate with the sentiments of Catherine Ellis (2004) when she said, “Stories are the way humans make sense of their worlds....Stories are essential to human understanding....Stories are the focus of Homeric literature, oral traditions, narrative analysis, and fairy tales. Given their importance, I argue that stories should be both a subject and a method of social science research” (p. 32). That is how my research methodology became my subject of study as well.

In 1997, Lisa Roberts stood in the midst of a philosophical upheaval in the museum world and looked back over the last 15 years of institutional museum history. Over those last 15 years, she watched the role of Museum Educator become increasingly important and was inspired to ask the question, “How has the establishment of the museum education profession changed the institution?” In her interactions with teams of museum professionals creating an educational exhibit, she observed deeply rooted pedagogical controversies rising to the surface. In the present context of Lisa’s life, educators, curators, and designers were at odds over issues related to the question, “What does it mean to educate in a museum setting?”

Through her observations of the discussions that surrounded the development of one exhibit, Lisa Roberts (1997) identified four major topics of discussion. “Entertainment, empowerment, experience, and ethics: each of these domains represents an aspect of current thinking about the meaning of “education” in museums today (p. 131).” All of these debates among museum professionals at the time developed around changing definitions of knowledge and interpretation.

Almost fifteen years later, I was in the same position that Lisa found herself. I felt as though I was standing in the midst of a profession in transition, but when I read her narrative of museum philosophy, I sometimes felt slightly displaced in time and place. I heard, through her words, the echoes of the same museum professionals I was working with involved in the same disputes that she dealt with then. Reading her work fifteen years later, I felt as though I had been dropped into the same context and socio-cultural environment that surrounded her. I was beginning to feel as though her studies were for naught until I heard her share her final conclusions.

Roberts determined that the prevailing mode of thought of the time was two-fold: that “the essence of the education enterprise is...the making of meaning”; and that “education is not just about museums teaching visitors, it is about visitors using museums in ways that are personally significant to them” (p. 132-133). Having outlined all of the controversies she pinpointed these two key philosophies toward which many museum professionals were gravitating. Then, in conclusion, she summed up all of the thoughts of the day into a viewpoint that she alone championed during the formative years of museum education: “Education is a narrative endeavor” (p. 131).

I think that if the Lisa Roberts of 1997 were to step fifteen years forward in time and into the context of my museum experience, she would not be surprised to find that we still struggle to find consensus on many of the same issues. She would be pleased to discover that we still operate on the basic assumption that education is about making meaning and should make museums personally relevant. And, she might be intrigued to hear how frequently museum educators speak of providing a “narrative experience”, how consistently curators talk about writing a narrative interpretation (Hooper-Greenhill, 2007). Then, after listening closely for a bit longer, she might be disappointed at the realization that in the museum world of 2011, narrative education is considered to be synonymous with storytelling.

Only three years after Roberts’ book on narrative education was published, John Falk and Lynne Dierking (2000) were optimistic about expanding interest in the use of narrative form in museum exhibits, programs, and web-sites. Although many of the philosophies that make up Roberts’ narrative learning theory are paralleled in their popular and well respected writings on meaning making in museums, they still used the phrase “narrative form” to reference theatrical performances and programs in the museum setting. As time moved slowly forward, the

vocabulary of museum professionals began to sound and feel much more like the language of narrative theory.

In spite of the way professionals talked around that same time, Marlene Chambers (2003) of the Denver Art Museum felt that while strides toward meaning making were being taken, they still had a long way to go before they would be “walking the walk”. While she felt that the opportunity for progress at the time was more open than ever before, she stated, “there are still few indications that museums have actually begun to understand education as a meaning-making process and to value objects for their power to evoke personal narrative constructs (p. 156).” “Nor am I convinced,” she said, “that many professional museum educators even know about, much less embrace and practice, the constructivist theory of education as ‘narrative endeavor’ that Roberts explicates with such clarity and grace (2003, p. 153).”

Even thirteen years after Marlene Chambers re-asserted the importance of understanding education as a “narrative endeavor”, I was not convinced that museum educators know about or embrace the practice of narrative theory.

Some of the most well respected and highly acclaimed contemporary scholars of art education advocate the very same constructivist principles and theories outlined in Lisa Robert’s narrative philosophy (Falk & Dierking, 1992, 2000, 2005; Hooper-Greenhill, 1994, 1999, 2000a, 2000c, 2007; Simon, 2009). The same concepts are just identified by different names. Yet, those in the field who are putting the theories into practice have enthusiastically begun to incorporate a more social, interactive, visitor-based approach, but are still overlooking the affective learning strategies that foster a personal element of the narrative. We have hands-on activities, immersive environments, and interactive electronics. Our visitors touch, smell, taste, create, and share. We talk about the importance of an exhibit’s narrative framework. We write a

narrative for them to read, we tell a story for them to hear, and occasionally we even record other voices. But, how often do we listen to their story? How often do we let them write the story? How often do we help our visitors live the story? So, today, in 2011, I echoed the sentiments of Marlene Chambers (2003):

Yet, as Roberts explains, it is the task of education to facilitate experiences in which world visions can collide and re-form through the process of observing, comparing, and assessing their relative value in various contexts. For it is only when experience challenges our expectations that we stop to examine our currently held intellectual construct about the world and, building on past meanings, create a new world of meaning. How often do exhibit elements invite the sort of exploration and critical thinking essential to the process of finding meaning in objects? How many gallery devices actually coach visitors in the use of skills?...many museum educators have done their best to make traditional information-driven labels more user friendly by making them shorter, livelier, and less complex, the net result of their efforts has been to effect cosmetic, “literary” changes rather than to explore revolutionary educational strategies. (p. 154)

Almost foreshadowing the story of the role narrative theories would play in museum education, Lisa Roberts recounted a story in her epilogue about how the exhibit used as her example of narrative practices fell out of use and was eventually forgotten. She was well aware that her knowledge may be lost or ignored in time, and that what remained would be changed and re-worked by others to follow in her footsteps.

Lisa Robert’s contemporaries asked the question, “What does it mean to educate in a museum setting.” One answer they contributed to the ever changing and growing field was, “To

educate is to help visitors learn how to make personal meaning.” Because they asked the question, visitor centered interpretation has become the primary objective for educators of my generation. But it is also true, as Lisa Roberts stated (1997), that “Each generation must ask and deal with new questions about education in light of the conditions and events of the day. Ours is not different (p. 8).” The questions that my generation grapples with are many and complex, but most of them are rooted in one foundational question, “How do we make the museum narrative meaningful to visitors?” Lisa Roberts looked into the future and suggested that the answer to that question may be a “narrative endeavor”.

I never really began my research with a question. The purpose of narrative based inquiry is not to begin with a question and end with the answer in the form of a theory. The intent of a narrative inquiry is to explore. It is “a ‘re-search,’ a searching again (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 124).” As Clandinin and Connelly put it, “Narrative inquiry carries more of a sense of continual reformulation of an inquiry than it does a sense of problem definition or solution (2000, p. 124).” There were actually many questions I was seeking out answers to, and in the end, they all led me a re-discovery of Lisa Roberts narrative theory. The purpose of my own narrative study will be to explore the ways in which museum exhibits can “inspire visitors to discover and construct their own narratives” (Chambers, 2003, p. 154-155). My inquiry is about the experience of learning narratively in a museum setting.

Speaking of the conclusion to her own narrative inquiry, Lisa Roberts (1997) said, “If there is a message—or perhaps a moral—here it is that the story remains unfinished....What new chapters unfold is now a matter of time and work” (p. 153). In the ensuing thesis, I will share with you a continuation of her story as I write the chapters of my own narrative experience.

Seeking a Comprehensive Methodology

I walked into her narrow little office with nothing in hand. She had hoped for two fleshed out, well written chapters outlining my thesis question and methodology of choice. Once again, I handed her a jumbled mess of passionate brainstorm thoughts all tied up in a bunch of loose ends. I sat in that same gray chair with my back to the bookcase, but this time I was flanked with a professor on either side: my advisor, and the committee member who turned my focus toward narrative. I wanted to conduct a narrative inquiry; that I knew, but I hadn't quite figured out exactly how to pull of my ideas in all of their complexity. That's where I was seeking help. I began to outline all of the different elements I would like to have included in my research, and explained that not all of what I wanted to do could be accomplished through a narrative inquiry.

I explained that most narrative inquiries begin with an autobiographical prologue to explain the researcher's position within the narrative landscape and integrate the researcher's voice (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Creswell, 2007). But in order to accomplish what I felt I needed to do, my story would need to be much more present. I would have to incorporate some auto-ethnography so that I could include my own experience in detail. Then, I would have others contribute their own individually written stories to a co-constructed narrative (Ellis & Berger, 2002).

I would need to collect narratives about how several different people had experienced the process of learning through the narratives related to a work of art. Perhaps I could look into how museum patrons with different levels of art proficiency experienced the narratives of art: focus on the "marginal", the "great", the "ordinary", and the "self" (Creswell, 2007). I also had to decide how to collect my data, in the form of their narrations. Should I conduct interviews?

Should I have them write and tell their own stories or would I interpret the stories they had passed on to me? How would I find a balance among all of our voices?

It was important to me that along with the written and recorded field texts obtained from these individuals, I would also be collecting as field texts visual works of art that were influential to their stories; but ideally, I wanted at least some of their own personal stories about narrative learning and art to be expressed through their own artistic creations. So, I would also have to include an element of art-based research to my methodology (McNiff, 1997).

In addition, I wanted to be able to take all of the verbal and visual narrations I collected and weave them into an exhibit narrative about how the story in art affects learning. The final research text needed to be written in a creative format. It needed to be multi-layered like a narrative account, for sure, but it also needed to feel more like creative writing (Riessman, 2008). I needed to be able to present my facts fashioned into the format of an exhibit text and design. The only theory that I could imagine making that possible was Creative Analytical Process Ethnography (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2008).

As I began to outline my proposed research plan, asking pertinent questions, I watched worry lines begin to develop on my advisor's brow, and stopped my chatter when I realized that the furrows were growing increasingly deeper. "This topic still seems really complex," she said for probably the twentieth time. "We need to narrow your focus and do a part of this study. You can write the dissertation later." But I thought I had simplified!

"Why don't you just tell your own story, Angela?" Asked the other professor. "That's what you do naturally. You've had dozens of experiences you could share. You probably already have a lot of them written anyway."

I stared at him blankly for a moment and then began to nod my head. “I know. That’s what I wanted to do! But, the problem I’m running into is that narrative inquiry involves multiple voices, not just one.”

I’d begun looking into narrative research with the intent to approach my study autobiographically, after all I had read, I had determined that narrative inquiry usually involves multiple voices-- multiple “I’s”, and so it would be imperative to interview several different individuals (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Creswell, 2007). The researcher spends time interacting with participants and plays an integral role in the experience and the interpretation of the stories collected. Researchers may even collect autobiographical stories as field texts, but they are usually not the stories of the researcher himself. Narratives exist as multi-layered compositions made up of the stories told by participants, the re-interpretation of the inquirer, and the interpretation of the reader, in which case, the study cannot consist of the researcher’s autobiographical narrative (Riessman, 2008).

There were many other approaches I looked into that may have allowed me to focus solely on the stories of one individual: interpretive biography, case study, narrative ethnography, personal narrative--a topical selection of narrative episodes that are specific to an event or epiphany occurring in one’s life history (Denzin, 1989a; Riessman, 2008; Chase, 2008; Creswell, 2007). The only problem was that all of these methods consisted of autobiographies written by the subject of study, not the researcher. In all of these cases, the researcher learned from the experiences of someone else.

And so, I explained that auto-ethnography was the only research methodology I had found that would allow me to study myself as a subject through my own memoirs or lived experiences (Chase, 2008; Creswell, 2007, Ellis & Berger, 2002; Ellis & Bochner, 1996; Ellis &

Flaherty, 1992). The most exciting part of the prospect of altering my course would be that auto-ethnographies are often written in the form of an alternative text (Denzin, 2003; Ellis & Berger, 2002; Ellis & Bochner, 1996; Richardson & St. Pierre, 2008). Auto-ethnographies are a kind of performance ethnography, or “creative analytical ethnography”. CAP ethnographies are not considered to be alternative or experimental; rather, a valuable integration of creativity and analytical thought (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2008). It would allow for the creativity that fuels my scholarship!

He seemed concerned at the idea of stepping outside the domain of education and adopting my methodology from the field of anthropology. He thought it would be difficult to use a methodology that we did not know much about yet, and I agreed. But, I pointed out to him that out of all qualitative studies, ethnography is the most similar to narrative inquiry. I explained that auto-ethnography is actually a large part of what is now being called narrative ethnography: a hybrid approach in which ethnography has been adapted to function like narrative inquiry in which stories become the medium (Ellis, 2004; Chase, 2008).

In fact, I said, “I have found auto-ethnography categorized by scholars as a narrative approach rather than a branch of ethnography (Chase, 2008). But even if it is conducted just like narrative inquiry, I still run into problems there because it seems like auto-ethnography is in large part self-discovery. It’s a method of learning about yourself through writing. It would also allow me to look beyond myself and explain how my experiences become meaningful to a wider cultural or social sphere, but it still seems strictly social in nature (Ellis, 2004). It’s all about ‘[making] the personal political’, creating ‘debate about issues of injustice’, ‘[disturbing] the status quo’, and ‘[probing] questions of identity’ (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008, p. 50-51). That’s not the intent of my research.”

Because auto-ethnography is “part auto or self and part ethno or culture”, I would be able to write about my own learning experiences from my point of view, and my own thoughts and actions in relation to my social interactions with others and within a museum culture—which was essential to me (Ellis, 2004, p. 31-32). But, there were still some elements of narrative inquiry that auto-ethnography could not lend to my study. Fortunately, those social relationships were not my central focus--I wanted to utilize my narratives about these relationships as a vehicle through which to explore an educational theory, and auto-ethnography does not address theory. On the other hand, if I were to conduct my study through narrative inquiry, on the other hand, I could still write into my story the theory that has played into and affected the experiences of my life. My study could be guided and informed by theory as I would seamlessly weave it throughout the text all along the way without prescribing applications (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Cresswell, 2007).

I had also learned that most often, auto-ethnographers avoid any kind of analysis of their autobiographical narrative, leaving all interpretation up to the reader (Chase, 2008). But narrative inquiry entails meaning making. It would allow me to synthesize my own stories, observations, the conversations I’ve had with others, and literature I’ve read and “re-story” it all into a new overarching master narrative (Creswell, 2007; Riessman, 2008). I could present my interpretation of the whole as long as I was very clear in stating that I have shared only one of many possible interpretations (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

Narrative would also allow me to pay special attention to consequential sequence of ideas and experiences so that I could really focus on the possibilities of what might effect change in knowledge or understanding over time. It would really help me to better understand the process of learning (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Creswell, 2007; Riessman, 2008). Auto-ethnography

requires a sequential story line surrounding an epiphany, but its focus is not on the nuances of the process, only the end product that comes in the form of a moral or resolution (Ellis, 2004). To my epiphany, the only resolution is an un-ending series of continuous change over time.

“Well,” my professor replied, “you might have to combine methodologies. You may find that you have to take bits and pieces of different methodologies and put them together to create your own methodology that will work for you and accomplish your goals. You’ll just have to write a chapter explaining how and why you’ve pieced together these different approaches.”

That was where our office visit came to an end and a greater search began.

Making Narrative My Own

The great irony of Lisa Roberts’ work, I discovered, is that as the premier champion of narrative methods of learning in the museum field, she did not identify her own research methodology as being narrative at all. Somehow in my reading of her text, I had missed that introductory note. Just a few years earlier scholars in the field of education were just beginning to revive and promote a narrative approach in the field of education, referring to it as the “new narrative approach” (Casey, 1995).

Perhaps because of the scholarly climate in which she was writing, narrative methodologies were not widely recognized enough for her to define it as such, I really can’t be sure. But, because she was a narrative learner, Roberts could not reduce the depth of understanding she would gain from her research experience by limiting herself to the confines of one commonly practiced research methodology. Instead, she seamlessly wove together the functionality of three different approaches that would give her the leeway she needed for an in-depth exploration: ethnography, literary theory, and historical analysis. “By employing these

three methods together,” Roberts stated, “this book puts into practice one of its central theses: that meaning arises out of multiple contexts (1997, p. 11).”

In order to achieve her purposes, Roberts also deviated slightly from the traditional applications of these standard research practices. A very contemporary ethnographic school of thought allowed her, as the researcher, to become immersed as a full participant in the culture and provided her with a personal and social context that would capture a holistic experience. Her creative application of literary theory allowed her to classify exhibits as the ultimate narrative construction. It allowed her to expand the definition of a “text” to include a three dimensional exhibit space as a text to be analyzed, providing an interpretive and constructive context within a setting or space.

When juxtaposed with the literary and ethnographic dimensions, a historical analysis provided Roberts’ inquiry with the context of temporality and continuity over time. Essentially, by utilizing all three methods integrally, Lisa Roberts crafted a singular narrative methodology specifically designed for conducting research in the field of museum studies. Interestingly enough, in designing this personalized narrative methodology, Lisa Roberts specifically included three contexts that became the foundational criteria for a broader methodology that would be outlined in detail three years later by Jean Clandinin and Michael Connelly as “Narrative Inquiry”.

If Lisa Roberts could synthesize ethnography, literary theory, and historical analysis into a narrative inquiry, then I can compose my own narrative methodology as well.

My research will appear to be an interesting amalgamation of little bits and pieces taken from many different methodologies. Some chapter segments will appear to be composed of literary theory, historical analysis, art analysis, oral history, or theoretical literature review.

That's because that's how we learn: never in isolation, always forging connections between all contexts and every unique experience. It is also true that the products of each of these individual studies can be used as field texts for narrative inquiry, and so that is exactly what I will do.

On a more general level, the study will in some ways mimic the example of my mentor, Lisa Roberts, by integrating three methodologies into one narrative method of inquiry that is my own.

My great concern about sticking strictly to my autobiography was that I would fail to create something valuable to others. When it comes to self-reflection, I'm a pro. I'm also a natural when it comes to exposing social injustice. But this document needed to be something that would be beneficial to museum educators, not just myself. So, I went in search of some guidelines that would help me do just that. In an article on autobiographical research in education, I found the following piece of advice:

When biography and history are joined, when the issue confronted by the self is shown to have relationship to and bearing on the context and ethos of a time, then self-study moves to research....Self-study researchers stand at the intersection of biography and history. The questions self-study researchers ask arise from concern about and interest in the interaction of the self-as-teacher educator, in context, over time, with others whose interests represent a shared commitment to the development and nurturance of the young and the impact of that interaction on self and other (Hamilton, 1998). (Bullough & Pinnegar, 2001, p. 15)

By virtue of the methods she selected for her research, Lisa Roberts (1997) corroborated this opinion. She began her study with the combination of personal, humanistic stories interwoven with a historical analysis explaining the context that led up to their interactions. Where she used

ethnography in conjunction with history, I will substitute auto-ethnography to create a self-study in education.

In the same article by Bullough and Pinnegar (2001), I also found a detailed set of guidelines for an effective self-study that really intrigued me. If I had to construct a list of guidelines for narrative inquiry in education, it would be almost identical. This was the list I had long been looking for that explains how I can conduct a valid narrative study consisting of my own stories that would be relevant to the field of museum education. It is auto-ethnography, it is personal narrative, it is historical analysis, it is self-study...it is narrative inquiry.

I will call the methodology Autobiographical Narrative Inquiry.

As I approach my research from this angle, I will do so with the intention of adhering to the outlined guidelines of self-study which I have personalized. Particularly, my autobiographical narrative study should:

1. Promote insight and interpretation
2. Engage the history of museum education and the museum context in which I work forthrightly
3. Express my honest stand
4. Address the problems and issues that make me a museum educator
5. Carefully place me and other persons in the context of their setting
6. Offer fresh perspectives on established theories in narrative theory in museum education
7. Reveal, but also interrogate, the relationships, contradictions, and limits of the views I present.

That said, a self-study in education would be absolutely complete with a collaboration between autobiography and history, but a self-study in art museum education may not be. As a

museum educator, Lisa Roberts felt the need to add a third layer to the dynamic of her study, and I do, too. I believe that my field exists in things creative, things interpretive, and physical manifestations of the narratives we share. It is never complete without those elements, and so I began looking for a way to infuse my research theory with some elements of art-based research or CAP ethnography into my theory.

Roberts drew upon the methods of literary criticism to incorporate the physical into her study because it allowed her to read and interpret the physical museum exhibit—a creative construct—as a text. In essence, it allowed her to consider a new variety of texts that could be applied to scholarly research. I never had to worry about seeking out a theory that will approve the analysis of visual or material texts as field texts. Narrative inquiry is already inclusive of a wide variety of different things that can be considered “texts” to be interpreted, studied, and analyzed. In addition to more traditional texts such as recorded interviews, conversations, letters, journals, memoirs, and recorded introspection, a narrative tradition includes among possible field texts visual culture, audio-visual media, photographs, works of art, memory boxes, and possessions or ritual objects—known in the museum as artifacts (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, Creswell, 2007; Riesmann, 2008).

As important as it was for me to be able to begin my inquiry with art, I wanted to move beyond gathering art as data or as a field text. My inquiry must begin with art, and I intended to create art-based field texts, but I also wanted to be able to use a creative media to analyze the research I was gathering and to present my interpretation of the information I collected (DeMello, 2007). Auto-ethnography seemed to be the best way to unite a written autobiography with a physical, artistic interpretive process and a final research text.

I became very familiar with Carolyn Ellis and her associates because they delved deeply into a 15 year project promoting “ethnographic alternatives” which advocated for the validity of many experimental forms of writing in research texts. They encouraged researchers in the field of anthropology to “use novel forms for expressing lived experience including literary, fictional, poetic, auto-ethnographic, visual, performative, and co-constructed modes of narration” (Bochner & Ellis, 2003, p. 509). I had begun to fall in love with the idea of alternative ethnographical theories when I came across an article about narrative research in the library catalog that had Carolyn Ellis’s name on it (Bochner & Ellis, 2003). I had expected to be introduced to “The Arts and Narrative Research” by D. Jean Clandinin, not by an expert in auto-ethnography.

I quickly found the article, printed it, and found a quiet place to sit--and it’s a very good thing that I was sitting when I read it. This article was a gold mine! It was the documentation that would shift my paradigm of thought and completely alter the course of my research. This article was a record of the glorious day when alternative auto-ethnography met narrative inquiry and their interaction resulted in art as inquiry.

In 2001, Carolyn Ellis and Arthur Bochner were invited to attend a seminar in Helsinki, Finland on the topic “The Arts and Narrative Inquiries.” The seminar was intended to “position the arts as media for personal and collective narratives in diverse professional and cultural settings...[to] foreground art not simply as research, but as a mode of narrative inquiry, as a way of transgressing conventions and as a method for understanding one’s own life, producing multicultural knowledge, evoking self-understanding, and representing research findings (Bochner & Ellis, 2003, p. 506).” That was it. It was all there. My entire research methodology had been consolidated into one practice and the art-based educational research community that

had already made efforts to validate it. I felt like Arthur Bochner and Carolyn Ellis (2003) did when they viewed exhibits that displayed art as inquiry: “[I] had entered a parallel universe” (p. 506).

This seminar and similar efforts taught the academic world how art could be used in scholarly research and have paved the way for using art as:

1. A text
2. A mode of representation
3. A mode of inquiry
4. A research methodology
5. A narrative practice (Bochner & Ellis, 2003, p. 510).

Before that fortunate event in the library when auto-ethnography, art, narrative, and I converged in one place, I did not think that there could be one comprehensive methodology that would fulfill my research needs as a museum professional, not even narrative inquiry. But, when I was introduced to this new philosophy, also referred to by Dilma Maria de Mello (2007) as “art-based/art-informed” narrative inquiry, my research methodology was not all that changed. My entire understanding of my educational past, my profession, and my perpetual interest in art and stories all changed.

De Mello (2007) had referred to a method of narrative inquiry that was both art-based and art-informed. Art-based research involved learning and gathering information through the process of art-making (Barone & Eisner, 1997; McNiff, 1998; McNiff, 2008). Art-informed research was a process through which individuals could collect information by viewing, analyzing, and interpreting art instead of by creating it (Cole & Knowles, 2008, 2011; Cole, Neilsen, Knowles & Luciani, 2004). They were two separate and distinct methodologies, but for

the first time, I was seeing the two practices united and the idea of merging them into one seamless process was exciting. Likewise, it was the first time I had come across a scholarly source that empowered me to expand the concepts of art-based and art-informed research to include narrative inquiry (De Mello, 2007; Ewing, 2011).

Now I could practice the art-informed narrative inquiry that Lisa Roberts sought out through literary theory. I could use art as a means of gathering and studying field texts to be analyzed. But, I could also dive into an art-based approach to narrative inquiry. I could create as a part of the process of documentation and analysis, and my final research text could be an artistic creation (DeMello, 2007). The potential now existed to create my research in so many different media: autobiographical writing, painting, drawing, literary compositions, photographs, written letters, poetry, fiction, memory work, introspection, and yes, even museum exhibitions could be defined as research texts (DeMello, 2007; Bochner & Ellis, 2003; Richardson & St. Pierre, 2008). More important than my understanding of what I now know I can do with regard to my research, I discovered that I had been doing it all along. I had been utilizing my own iteration of auto-biographical art-informed narrative inquiry for as long as I could remember, and I had been teaching others to do it as well.

My own methodology has always been autobiographical art-informed narrative inquiry, and it is also the research methodology I have pieced together for my thesis.

Chapter Four Preface

Dear Reader,

After reading about my selected methodology, you would expect to encounter next a detailed research plan. I intended to jump right into the details, but as I began to think through all of the “hows” of narrative research, I quickly became lost in a myriad of ways in which the actual act of narrative research could be achieved.

In order to help me discover a practical application of the methodology that I could easily employ on a daily basis, I looked back on my memories of moments when I had witnessed narrative inquiry in action in search of a good model to follow. So, before you encounter a detailed research plan, you will find a flashback to some of my experiences as a classroom art educator.

Here again, I will ask you to look beyond the seemingly tangential nature of this reminiscence. In the process of reflecting upon this ordinary application of the narrative inquiry process, I experienced another one of those “ah-ha!” moments when my methodology converged with every-day practice and became more than just the “hows” of my thesis project. I suddenly began to see narrative inquiry as more than just a scholarly research practice, and I suddenly began to understand it as an educational process that could be practiced in alternative settings.

I originally concluded this chapter with a detailed explanation of how I intended to conduct my narrative research because that is what would be expected in any typical thesis. But, by the time I had finished writing, this exploration had ceased to be an introduction to what I was going to do and had become a narrative record of the research I had already done and answers I had already begun to find through the process of devising a research plan. It is now not only an explanation of how I did conduct my research, but also a good portion of thesis content.

As you peruse my research plan, remember that there is a functional purpose for its inclusion, but, the conceptual building blocks that emerged from this chapter will be just as important to the outcome of my narrative findings as was the process it outlined—perhaps even more important.

The Redbook Project

“Every man [is] his own methodologist!” (Mills, 1959, p. 123)

“Thus, I see art not only as a product, a mode of representation, or even a superior skill but also as a way of living, a way of looking at the world and the life and education in it.”

(DeMello, 2007, pg. 206)

Seeking a Metaphor

It felt like I was a first time freshman all over again. I was frustrated and way behind schedule, and to be frank, I had worked myself into a bit of a panic. I found myself on the phone with my dad, tears streaming down my face as he lovingly tried to “pull me down out of my tree” (that’s always how he described it anyway).

“But, it’s not like the kind of thesis you wrote,” I said. “It’s a new methodology and it is *supposed* to feel like creative writing. All of the books I’ve read list one of the criteria for a good narrative inquiry is aesthetic merit (Cresswell, 2007). If I’m going to do this right, it has to be creative, but most importantly, it has to be well written. If it’s going to be literature, it really has to be literature. And if it’s going to be art, then it has to be pleasing for others to read. I always think that I’m doing just fine, and I’ll get a bit written and then suddenly become all bogged down in evidence, theory, and citations. Then I stop and realize that I’ve stopped writing my story and have begun to log knowledge.

“OK, then, I want you to do this: Start writing again. But, start writing a story. Forget that you need to have all of the citations and stuff like that, you can put them in later. But, for now, just write a story. Whenever you start to feel yourself slipping into something dry and

sterile, and every time you find yourself writing in any way that doesn't sound like *your* voice—if it's not your way stop, throw it away, and start all over.”

That was eight months and three entire discarded chapters ago. I step back now and assess the last chapter I've written and realize that it's still not truly narrative. I remember Dad's words when I cried to him on the phone and realize that I'm still trying to do it someone else's way. I need to find “my way” to research. I've looked back into my school files and dug out an assignment that I remembered as being exactly what the product of a narrative exploration should be. Holding it in my hand I wonder, “Why did it come so naturally then, but I just can't seem to do it now?”

I read through the pages of that assignment—a little book I had created when I was asked to write a personal narrative. It was so eclectic—a compilation of many different writing styles. It was unique, that's for sure. But every single segment in that book captured 100% of “ME”. The things I was learning at the time were all there, but I also found encapsulated there the deepest, even painful emotions I felt during that learning process. That's what this thesis is missing. It's got a good strong case for a rationale, it's full of a lot of theoretical detail, and it's well documented. It has captured the deep and complex nature of my learning over the last few years, but it's missing my heart, my soul, and especially my style.

What exactly is my style? How am I going to summarize all of my knowledge, plus all of my soul in one seamless text?

I remembered the words of Clandinin and Huber (2002) as they reflected on their struggles when they began to try to define for themselves what narrative inquiry really was. “We needed a metaphor to help us represent the wholeness of our lives and the lives of the participants with whom we engaged....we wanted to represent people, not as taken apart by

analytic categories, but as people who were composing lives full of richness and complexity, lives with artistic and aesthetic dimensions” (p. 163).

I needed a metaphor. I needed more than a metaphor that represented real life art-informed narrative inquiry—not something contrived to fit the demands of a theoretical framework. I needed more than a metaphor, I needed a technique that did more than “represent” a scholarly approach. I needed a practical, real-world application. I needed to do it the way I’ve been doing it every day—not as a scholar, but as a real and complete human being.

That’s when I remembered “The Redbook Project.” The Redbook was a genuine, authentic autobiographical art-informed inquiry.

Seeing the Inquiry Behind the Cover

“The Redbook Project” began as a simple adaptation to an assignment in my commercial art curriculum, intended to meet the needs of one struggling student. In time, it became one of the most effective teaching tools I ever utilized within, and far beyond, the classroom setting.

The original “Redbook” was assigned as a project to help channel a young girl’s self-abuse into productive creativity. Instead of cutting herself when emotion overwhelmed her, she was assigned to turn the blade toward a magazine and cut out images she could use to create a composition telling the stories of her personal life. Keeping her stories private was important to Kami, so I pilfered a tattered old history book from my grandfather’s basement and she wrote and created right over the top of the faded and yellowed typeset pages. This meant that Kami’s delicate and vulnerable life experiences were hidden between the pages of another author’s story, and concealed behind the title and cover of another book. Ignorance often breeds coincidence, and absolutely unaware of Carl Jung’s “Red Book” containing a visual and narrative record of

his psychological analysis, we gave the project what we thought was a generic and inconspicuous name. The cover of Kami's book just happened to be RED.

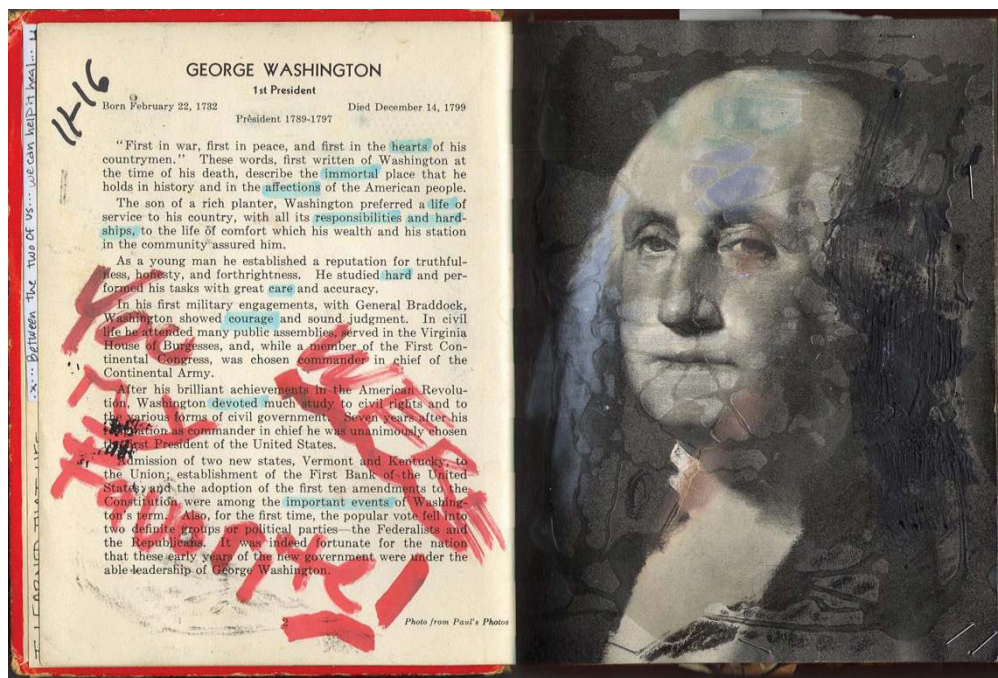


Figure 4.1. Sample of the original Redbook

Kami and I secretly exchanged The Redbook at least once a week. When the book was in her possession, she wrote about what she was experiencing in her life and illustrated the story of that moment with a collage on the following page. When her book was entrusted to my care, I responded to her stories with memories of similar experiences that I'd had in my life and the lessons I had learned from them. I added to the book my own visual response to her creation. Sometimes Kami responded to my thoughts with new insights of her own. At other times, we moved on to explore different experiences. Kami's Redbook was bulging enough to break the binding by the middle of the semester. That book was so cherished and so well worn that I decided to introduce the project to several other students thereafter. Every Redbook project has been as unique as the student who created it. Together, those little books contain a rather eclectic array of life experiences. Every student who became immersed in the Redbook project

had a different primary interest that they explored through the creative process and told very different stories about what they were learning. Within the project pages, I saw them explore personal identity, social relationships, artistic techniques and even scholarly disciplines as intense as quantum physics. Some Redbooks were kept very private while others became large scale collaborative projects with students passing the book around their circle of friends, each responding to the work of those who had the book before them. They added, altered, tweaked, re-worked, and created anew, always building upon what the book already contained to reflect their own experiences.

Jake's Redbook was unique in that it never contained much more than a few handwritten pages. Jake wasn't ever particularly interested in art, but he always had a multitude of questions on his mind fighting for his attention. His life-long dream was to become "the smartest boy in the world" but he felt like he wasn't even "smart enough to play football". Together we decided that intelligence is not determined by your IQ, but by the questions you ask; so, the focus of Jake's Redbook became finding the answers to his inquiries. On each page, Jake wrote one of his questions and dated the query. Then, under the question, he would write a short story or poem about how he discovered the answer, who helped him find it, and where his grand epiphany happened. As he completed each of his stories, Jake wrote down symbols, colors, and artistic elements that he would use to visualize his story. Later, we would return to those pages to create illustrations of his newfound knowledge. Jake didn't live long enough to illustrate his story. But, when he passed away, he had that Redbook in his pocket and I was told that he had carried that Redbook with him every day, everywhere he went since the project began.

I knew then that the Redbook project was an educational method that people, particularly young people, could relate to. I knew that it was simple and ordinary. I knew that it was fun and

engaging. But, I also knew that learning came easy for them when it was drawn from experience. I knew that the visual and written stories my students captured in their Redbooks reflected a complex and continuous learning process that even my seemingly most apathetic students naturally experienced every day just because they lived (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Riessman, 2008). And, I knew that it allowed those students to care about what they were learning because it was personal. They selected topics to explore that were of interest to them as individuals, and thus the project became relevant in their lives.

What I did not know then, and would not come to understand for many years, was that in assigning the Redbook project to these young kids, I was teaching them to conduct scholarly, quantitative research as an integral part of their everyday lived experiences. I asked them to conduct research in action, to learn by doing and by writing (Chase, 2008; Richardson & St. Pierre, 2008). I was asking them to immerse themselves in an art-based and art-informed narrative method of inquiry: an artistic narrative inquiry that became a living inquiry they engaged in as a part of their everyday lives (Springay, Irwin, & Kind, 2008).

A Story Based Exploration

Narrative inquirers explore a phenomenon through stories. Narrative based inquiry is not clearly definable and does not lead to a solution or a theory, but instead a broader understanding of practical experience (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000).

Each of my students was exploring what Jean Clandinin and Michael Connelly (2000) refer to as a “phenomenon” that occurred in their own realm of knowledge, daily practice, and understanding. Every day they were living out a story. Now, they were learning to make meaning of their experiences by telling the stories they lived. I never asked them to research any theories postulated by great scholars, to write a thesis statement, or to propose a hypothesis. In

most cases, they never even asked a specific question or set out to find a specific answer. Even Jake never found *the* answer. He, like all of the others, explored many possible answers. But, they were still conducting valid research.

Like the Redbook, narrative inquiry is not expected to result in a solution. It's not about the product created at the end of the learning experience, the perfect and refined philosophy, theory, or masterpiece. The primary focus of narrative inquiry is the continuous process of learning. It is about how we come to make meaning. The means and the end of narrative learning are integral. Experts in qualitative research say that "narrative inquiry carries more of a sense of a search, a "re-search," a searching again" (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000, p. 124). That is exactly what the Redbook project was all about. It was about knowing what was accepted as fact, and searching through a variety of related experiences again, perhaps many times over, to discover a deeper and more refined understanding. The Redbook project embodied the continual search of narrative inquiry in many ways. I suppose that's because as the educator assigning the project, I approached learning from interpretive, post-modern, and social constructivist paradigms, all of which the narrative method of inquiry embraces (Riessman, 2008; Creswell, 2007).

A Meaning Making Process

Narrative inquiry is a process of interpretation and meaning making. It is not evidential, nor reductive. Narrative inquiry implies that truth is tentative and relative (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000).

My students weren't really like detectives, collecting evidence that would be deduced down into proof of one absolute truth. The act of creating a Redbook was much less reductive than that. Perhaps that's because when we learn narratively, we know that there isn't just one truth, only

meaning made through interpretation and the bringing together of diverse facts. The authors of the Redbooks collected little bits and pieces of information they had gleaned from past and present understandings of the world. They found connections between the little things in their lives and stories found elsewhere in the world: in history, science, art, culture, or any other topics they were interested in. Then they drew and pasted, reflected and wrote, piecing them all together into a broader understanding. They searched for common threads and connections that identified the relationships between things and unified them in a narrative interpretation (Riessman, 2008; Clandinin & Connelly, 1990).

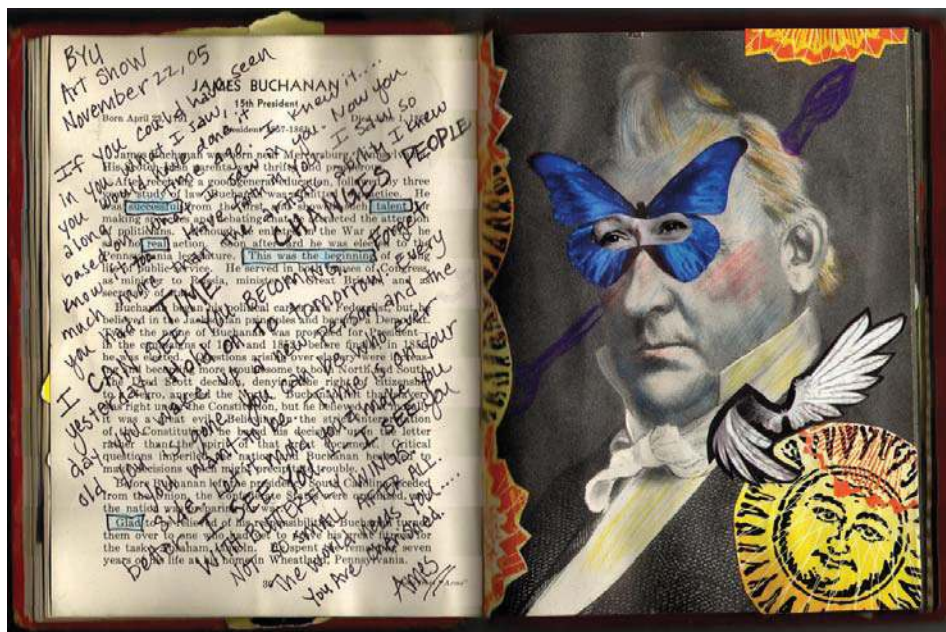


Figure 4.2. Sample from the original Redbook

Every Redbook contained a lot of different stories, written by a lot of different people. Each of those stories illustrated a unique interpretation of the world. Multiple, equally valid interpretations could be written on its pages and a variety of stories could be told in this book at the same time (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Kami's perspective and my own were often contradictory, but they were simultaneously added and occupied the same space. Each was considered truth because of the experiences that they drew upon. We both became learners, and

neither was an authority. Both of our interpretations were valued contributions and they enriched one another by co-existing as layered stories.

The beauty of the Redbook project was that, like narrative inquiry, it was based on an understanding that the answers to our questions are relative and dependent upon the context of the experience of the storyteller. From the perspective of a narrative scholar, all research conducted has been subject to the knowledge and background of the researcher (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). The Redbook was the same way. Any meaning discovered and all knowledge ever gleaned from the project came only through an understanding of the context in which the stories recorded were experienced. The Redbook also made allowance for the tentativeness that comes with a dynamic, ever-changing understanding. As they wrote or created, my students could only know the truth of the world as it was for them in that particular moment. But, as their context and experience shifted with the passage of time, they were always adding, reworking, revising, and rewriting over their existing story.

A Three-Dimensional Space

Narrative inquiry occurs within the context of a three-dimensional space (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, 1990; Clandinin & Huber, 2002; Creswell, 2007).

We created many of projects in my classroom that were intended to provide rich and affective learning experiences more deeply rooted than the surface of the two dimensional canvas. We could make any painting personal and rich with layered meaning. We could even move beyond painting and drawing to construct tangible symbols of life that exist in three-dimensional space. But, no project we ever did succeeded in creating a three-dimensional narrative learning space to the extent that the Redbook did.



Figure 4.3. Sample from the original Redbook

Three-dimensional installations or sculptures added complexity to constructions of our understanding of the world by allowing us to think not only within the contexts of height and width, but in depth as well. We were free to build up and down, side to side, and in and out. But, the depth and breadth of the wisdom gained through narrative inquiry requires even more than three *physical spatial* dimensions. Complete narrative understanding must consist of three dimensions of *experiential perspective* as well: *interaction, continuity, and situation*. A Redbook is small in scale compared to most artistic creations. It's compact and doesn't have much mass. But, when opened to view the pages within, that little book expands to provide a true three-dimensional learning experience.

Looking Inward and Outward

Interaction allows us to look “inward and outward” through an integration of personal insight and socially constructed learning (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000, p. 50).

If you had suggested to me then that the Redbooks my students turned in could even compare to qualitative research, I would not have believed it. There were no surveys, no focus

groups, no statistics, and especially no conclusive answers. Those kids recorded some of the most deeply and passionately felt personal stories one can imagine. They were most excited about capturing individualistic thoughts, perspectives, emotions, reactions, and relationships. Everything about the Redbook made the knowledge that came from it subjective. It was just too, well, human to be scholarly research. What I am learning now, is that a narrative based methodology of inquiry is effective *because* of, not in spite of the fact that it explores the whole experience of learning as felt and lived and encountered by human beings (Riessman, 2008; Clandinin and Connelley, 1990).

The tenants of narrative inquiry remind us that research does not occur in an isolated atmosphere, void of the subjectivity of personal values or the influence of human relationships. According to Clandinin and Connelly (2000), we, as learners can look *inward and outward* along a personal-social dimension: “By inward, we mean toward the internal conditions, such as feelings, hopes, aesthetic reactions, and moral dispositions. By outward, we mean toward the existential conditions, that is, the environment” (p. 50).

Every single Redbook project began with the self. The personal nature of the Redbook was not an accident, nor does it void the validity of these studies as scholarly. Kami wrote about her internal feelings and emotions, Jake wrote about curiosities he had about the world, and many others began by expressing their own opinions or thoughts regarding the world around them. Sometimes they developed stories of others from the perspective of an observer, but often they developed their own voices and wrote about their inquiries in the first person, a definitive characteristic of narrative research (Chase, 2008).

Often, the only way to get the Redbook “researchers” to become invested and engaged in the project was to have them begin with an autobiographical account of their interests, a

description of their inner selves. They, like all researchers, needed to understand themselves in order to be able to understand how they would interpret external information (Chase, 2008). Their introductions to self and personal context fulfilled the same purpose as the autobiographical prologue present in many narrative research texts (Clandinin & Connelly, 2008). It helped express the student's reasoning for delving into a particular topic of interest and their personal connection to it. It also provided a transparent context through which I, as a reader, could understand the personal background, thought paradigms, and theoretical ideologies that would influence the way that each student interpreted the information they were collecting.

Although many of the Redbooks created were very private and confidential, not one was created in isolation. Every page, every text, every illustration was colored and shaped in some way by a variety of social relationships that influenced the student's understanding of their unique phenomenon (Chase, 2008; Richardson & St. Pierre, 2008). It was never my intention, nor my request, that students analyze the ways in which people of the past and of the present influenced their understanding of the world; but, invariably evidence of those influences were captured in the creative narratives they recorded. When given the freedom to study any topic they desired, they analyzed experiences drawn from their cultural backgrounds, historical stories, and their family heritage. They discussed interactions with their parents, fights with their friends, and conflict between identity and culture. They used their narratives first to begin to understand their own thoughts and behaviors, then to understand the experiences of others, and finally to grasp the relationship between the two (Chase, 2008).

Every Redbook began with personal reflections on existential conditions, and then reached outward to focus on a creative form of conversational exchange: the learning that occurs socially. All of them integrated the narratives of a wide variety of individuals with whom they

interacted on a day-to-day basis. Kami's Redbook included just as many narratives about my experiences as her own. When our stories converged, our understandings were often altered. I often inserted my own reflections on her thoughts by drawing symbols right into the middle of one of her artistic expressions, allowing our dialogue to alter the meaning made therein, and she often wrote direct responses to my text. As you flipped from page to page, through our visual and verbal exchange of insight, you could read significant changes in what we knew to be true.

Jake...well, Jake told the stories of just about anyone in the world who would offer insight. As he asked others his questions and sought out information from peers, experts, and even complete strangers, the answers he discovered also changed over time. Some of the most interesting insights came from a Redbook that became a conglomeration of the experiences of a larger group of friends and peers. They would read, reflect, add, alter, amend, write over, paste in new elements, and contribute anything they could find that related at all to their theme. Their creative interactions with one another resulted in a very richly layered, narrative understanding of one theme experienced uniquely by several different people.

Like this beautifully constructed story, all narrative inquiry is collaboration between the learner and participating storytellers who narrate their experiences (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Reissman, 2008). There are as many different ways to integrate these collaborative stories as there are researchers, or Redbooks. In Kami's Redbook, our stories were layered and co-constructed. It was an interactive book in which we both became the learner as well as the researcher (Ellis & Berger, 2002). We each wrote our stories separately and they were juxtaposed in the same book. Jake collected the stories of others, but included an interpretation of them in his own voice. But, most Redbooks represented the interactions of several different

people, and all of their stories were integral, yet kept “separate and distinct” (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2008, Chase, 2008).

In all cases, those learning through Redbook research were immersed in the stories of others. Likewise, every Redbook researcher utilized its pages to record their own reflections upon how their thought processes were shifting and changing as they internalized those stories. The once plain and simple pages of an old book started to reflect a complex learning that occurred through human interaction. The knowledge of all participants was changed and influenced and subject to the contributions of others, and as you flipped through the pages of a Redbook, the progress of learning was made manifest as you witnessed the dialogue constructing new insights.

Looking Backward and Forward

Continuity enhances understanding by allowing us to look “backward and forward” embracing the temporality (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000, p. 50).

I used to sit and flip through Kami’s Redbook from cover to cover, over and over again, like a child watching the story in an animated flipbook unfold. It was fascinating to watch the pages transition from one thought to the next and to assess the change in her knowledge that occurred over time through our social interactions. I was always very acutely aware that she was not just living in a state of *being*; but that every day she was *becoming*. Part of the original goal of the Redbook project was to help her understand that all people are in a constant process of change and, therefore, we and the world are not doomed to our present fate nor are we constrained by the past. I created the assignment believing that her learning would increase and intensify if we approached it with the understanding that identity, truth, and knowledge are all continually

changing over time (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). In this sense, the Redbook was inspired by narrative temporality.

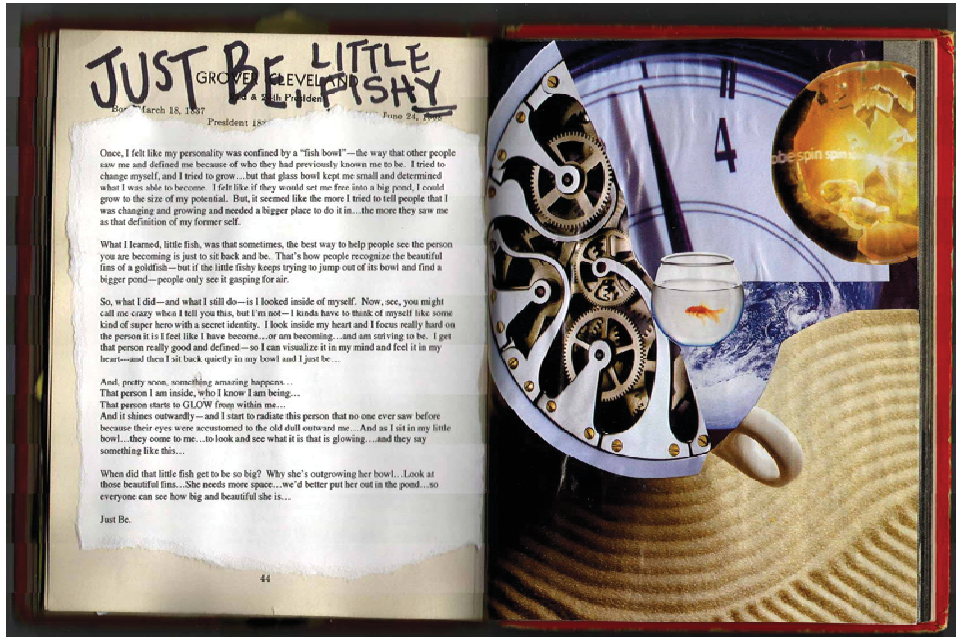


Figure 4.4. Sample from the original Redbook

Because temporality is so innate to the Redbook Project, it allows us to view a learning experience not only from an “inward” and “outward” perspective, but also from a vantage point where we can look “backward and forward” in time (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 50). Each page in Kami’s Redbook was like one frame in an illustrated flip-book story of her continuous search for knowledge. Every page might have contained a reflection on the experiences of her past, an explanation of her present, or her hopes and dreams for the future. And yet, each page captured only her present understanding of these experiences at a frozen moment in time. The rest of the book explained how she got to that point.

As Kami and I exchanged stories in an ongoing dialogue, our understanding of an issue increased, but it didn’t all happen in one lesson, one assignment, or even one classroom unit. It happened over the course of an entire semester, one entry at a time. In essence, it became her

cumulative learning portfolio, witnessing the progressive learning that can only happen over extended periods of time. We both *really were* living in a constant state of change and, collectively, the pages of her Redbook represented us that way. What makes the Redbook different from any other work of art depicting change over time is that hundreds of pages can be linked together with one binding.

Because I could flip through the pages of the Redbook as contained in a binding, I could see the continuity that developed unifying the diverse series of experiences (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Rather than viewing scattered excerpts as separate stories, I could see the relationships between all of Kami's experiences. What she knew while creating page fifteen was shaped by all of the learning gained in the pages before it and would, in turn, alter all of the pages that would come thereafter. By reading the pages in sequence, I could better understand the entire plotline of our collaborative learning narrative and focus on the nuances of change that occurred over time. I could turn back to page one and re-live the experiences of days past that brought her to a particular moment, and I could flip forward to page 107, and see how far she progressed thereafter. Even today, when I look at her Redbook, I don't just know *what* knowledge she had. I know *how* and *why* she knew it.

Kami's Redbook captured the process of constant change occurring in her understanding of the world, but it also acted as a reminder that people, collectively, are in a constant state of change, and that is a story to which there is no end. It was simply one volume of the current understanding of one individual which had been lifted out of the unending narrative of all human kind.

Long before Kami, Jake, or any other student ever had their Redbooks, someone else wrote the story inside its cover. Each one of them told the "truth" of the world according to

1915, 1959, or 1975, and told of only what that particular author knew regarding the subject at that given time. Every author can only write what he knows based upon the context in which he lives (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). But time continually moves forward, the plot line progresses, and new characters begin to live the story. And so, in the Redbook students wrote over the story that once existed, updating it with changes that occurred later in time. Kami's Redbook originally told the story of the American founding fathers and the independence they initiated, as understood by one historian in 1910. She added to that narrative, by recording in the book her continual search to understand what liberty and freedom meant in her personal life.

Sometimes, as happens in all disciplines, Kami's process of defining the "truth" about what liberty meant in her present moment completely covered up and replaced the knowledge that had been written in the past. But, often, the words and images that defined the past could still be deciphered through the layers she added in the present. In many cases, images or words printed decades ago became a foundation for her new creations and were so integral to her new work of art that it could not have existed without the original. In many of my students' Redbooks the truths they discovered in the future were built upon, and incorporated, what had existed in the book in the past.

No matter how the old and the new narratives interacted in the Redbook, each page captured a multiplicity of perspectives and in layers of knowledge in time. The thing about a Redbook is you never knew how many days it would be before someone else, or even yourself, would come back to that page and add a new layer of meaning in the future. Yet, the anticipation of the possibility that someone may rework your masterpiece did not hinder students like Kami in their creative efforts because they lived in temporality, knowing that they had changed what had been and understanding that it would all change again.

Looking Around

Situation reminds us to look “around” at the place and physical circumstances that help define a holistic learning experience.

The original Redbook Project was designed to help my students empower themselves to make changes in their lives over time and through social awareness, so it naturally placed their focus on looking “inward and outward”, “backward and forward”. But I didn’t see the third dimension of narrative learning incorporated into a Redbook until I started to participate in the process. As I began to respond to their thoughts by recounting memories of my own experiences, I found myself saying repeatedly, “When I was in China...”, “In this one city in Africa...”, or “In a little tiny trailer by the river...” At the time, I just dismissed it as evidence that my travels had added much more diversity to the existential conditions I looked “out” on than those of my students. Later, I reflected on my own Redbook studies and realized that “looking around” through my detailed descriptions of the physical place and environment where my learning experiences happened developed an essential perspective in understanding how I came to interpret my experiences the way I did.

In their early writings on the methodology of narrative inquiry, Clandinin and Connelly (2000) also considered the “place” where an experience occurred as part of the existential environment we look “outward” upon. Later, they determined that “place” is an actual physical environment and boundaries add a dimension to an experience that is distinct from the outward social context (p. 51). Great minds think alike, I suppose, and perhaps this paradigm shift on both counts suggests that the actual physical conditions in which we learn alter our perception of the experience as well as our construction of knowledge.

In the same way that the bound pages of a book help create continuity over time, the Redbook can sequentially piece together our interactions with physical places and tangible things in meaningful ways. In my personal Redbooks I have unintentionally “looked around” at not only the spaces in which I have had meaningful experiences, but also at the physical things that have become integral to my process of meaning making. I have written about the situation in great detail, but I have also re-created a reminiscence of the physical context with pencil lines, textures, colors, and photographs. As I flip back and forth from page to page, I can visualize the world and have a reference for drawing comparisons and pinpointing physical similarities and differences that may have altered the meaning I make of the experience.

A Rich, Holistic Story

Like all narrative inquiry, the Redbook represents people, “not as taken apart by analytic categories, but as people who are composing lives full of richness and complexity, lives with artistic and aesthetic dimensions” (Clandinin & Huber, 2002, p. 163).

Within the three-dimensional space of the Redbook, I had unknowingly asked my students to record everything that was “temporally continuous and socially interactive” (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p. 4), about their lived learning experiences. I had asked them to construct the pages of their Redbooks with layer, upon layer, upon layer of narrative, simply because it seemed to be how they were naturally learning in their everyday lives. They did not consciously pay particular attention to their interactions, the continuity of their experiences, or the situation in which they learned, but they were most certainly “storytelling organisms” (Clandinin & Connelly, 1990, p. 2). Every day in the halls, on the bus, or at the mall, they were “both living their stories in an ongoing experiential text and telling their stories in words as they reflect[ed] upon life and explain[ed] themselves to others” (p. 4).

My hope, from the beginning, was that the Redbook would help them become more aware of the layers of experience that so intimately influenced their lives so that they could use those stories in taking control of the outcome of the narratives of their future. What I didn't know was that scholars were using the same thought processes to conduct research that would shape our collective knowledge. Clandinin and Connelly (1990) help explain why a teaching tool like the Redbook has had such a tremendous impact on the lives of some of my students: "...because a life is also a matter of growth toward an imagined future and, therefore, involves retelling stories and attempts at reliving stories. A person is, at once, engaged in living, telling, retelling, and reliving stories" (p. 4). The Redbook Project facilitated the living of such a rich, storied life and captured the evidence of the process all at the same time.

My Redbook Narrative Inquiry

The beauty and the wonder of narrative based inquiry is that it really does just happen naturally as part of our ordinary, everyday lived experience. At this point in my research, I can choose to consider that to be a blessing or a curse. You see, I was in the process of developing a very systematic approach for collecting my research, when the research decided to jump ahead of me and turned my whole plan upside down.

I thought that I was simply in the preliminary process of reading about the criteria that constitutes a valid narrative study. I was figuring out what research texts I needed to collect, how I should approach proper documentation and recordkeeping, and how to adequately cite some of these unique sources. I was preparing daily journals, filed text notebooks for recording conversations, and filing systems for correspondence. Then, something completely unexpected happened. One of the articles I was reading about my methodology turned out to contain an incredible insight regarding my topic of inquiry.

The information I had stumbled upon wasn't just some small fact. It was one of those great "aha moments" when your entire perspective on a topic or truth completely shifts. It was what Norman Denzin (1989b) referred to as one of the great epiphanies in my autobiography that relates to the phenomenon of the relationship between story and art. It wasn't just one misplaced moment in my study either. This one great epiphany opened up the floodgates of understanding and every day of my life I was living my inquiry, but I didn't even realize I was doing it until after it had already happened. Before I knew it, I had lived some of the most important epiphanies of my study and had more story than I could write in a thesis, but I had no formal documentation of any of it.

I had been seeking answers to my questions all along, but didn't realize in the moment that what I had stumbled across would contribute to my understanding of my scholarly research. I had hoped to collect, keep, and analyze all of my research through a Redbook process. Unfortunately, at the time, I had not been keeping a Redbook of my personal educational explorations in education...because I was too busy trying to figure out how to write a thesis. Fortunately, I don't really need all of the in-the moment documentation in order for my story to be considered credible.

According to Norman Denzin (2008), "Narrative is retrospective meaning making—the shaping or ordering of past experiences. Narrative is a way of understanding one's own and others' actions, of organizing events and objects into a meaningful whole, and of connecting and seeing the consequences of actions and events over time" (p. 64). In light of this definition of narrative, I am going to present as my thesis a *reconstruction* of my own cognitive Redbook research project. In my thesis, I will collect my memories of the experiences I have had while exploring the relationship between narrative and art. I'll piece together short segments of my

personal narrative that relate to this one topic just as I experienced them as a part of my everyday life. Some of them will be my own experiences with the subject and in others, I will reminisce on my interactions with others regarding the topic. Then, looking back on them in retrospect, and reflecting on the learning that happened in action, I will use a narrative process similar to the Redbook learning process to organize them in a way that will help construct new meaning out of old experiences (McNiff, 2007).

My thesis may not look much like the Redbooks I explained earlier in this chapter because I hadn't started the process of creating one when the learning suddenly happened. So, this time, the art-based nature of my Redbook creation will be present in the form of literary, rather than visual, creation. But, it will still include memories of my art-based as well as art-informed narrative inquiry experiences, and it will represent the same Redbook processes that I unknowingly became involved in on a cognitive level.

Through my thesis, I can create for you a re-construction of the step-by-step learning process as I experienced it. I will show you how one moment of epiphany has affected the next and walk you through the flow of development in my thought process from the first grand epiphany right up until today. The Redbook narrative will not explain *what* I have learned, but will show you *how* my current understanding of the application of narrative theory was composed over time in all of its complexity, and why I now approach museum education so much differently (McNiff, 2007; Ellis, 2004).

I am quite certain that some of you will express concern about my use of memories that were not recorded until after the fact. I understand that I will remember the past through a memory colored by what I know and who I am in the present (Riessman, 2008). You will remind me that my mind will revise the past, perhaps interpreting it differently than it really

happened if I do not have field texts to rely upon (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000). My answer to that is, “Yes, you are correct.” There is no memory that is not selective (Freeman, 2007). For this reason, I hope to be very transparent in stating that these are personal narratives and as such, by definition are told and interpreted after the fact, but are not at all fictional (Chase, 2008; Richardson & St. Pierre, 2008).

In fact, there is a contemporary thought in autobiographical narrative that suggest that a re-telling of a memory may even be more true than an initial understanding of the experience. Mark Freeman (2007) explains the validity of memory in this way:

It may very well be...that the truest rendition of experience comes not from the immediate reality of the moment, flesh-and-bone solid though it may be, but from reflection, memory, *narrative* (Freeman, 2002a, 2003a). Realizations, narrative connections, are made after the fact, when the dust has settled. The result is that we are frequently *late* in our own understanding of things.” (p. 132)

This is exactly how I feel about the experiences I will be relating to you. I was not conscious enough about what I was learning or how it was affecting my thoughts or my actions to be able to understand what was happening in the moment. To me, I was simply having a conversation, reading a book, or discussing differing opinions in a meeting. But, when I could step back and put the memories of those experiences into context, an incredible new understanding of the reality of what happened emerged.

I will also tell you that my intent is not to determine the reality of the facts I share through these memories. For the purposes of this descriptive study, it is more important to understand the way the past is interpreted in my mind, and how that impacts my present, than to resurrect the actual scene that played out in the past. It is the meaning made of the moment and

what I took away from the experience that impacted moments to follow, not the nuances of the event itself. In light of that, I feel at liberty to take some artistic license with my memory. In my narrative re-construction, some of my story segments will be narrated in the present tense, as if I had written about them in the moment. Others will be written in the past tense, but as if I wrote about them within days of their occurrence. In this way, the new insights that occur through the process of writing will become art-based narrative inquiry.

That said, my Redbook creation will encompass more than just re-creations of journal entry reminiscences. You need to see my learning progress as it happened in real life—in a layered and seamless way, so I will share with you more than just a series of individual memories. I'll try to piece together a collective memory of how the entire learning process played out. Just like the Redbooks my students created, this one will contain a complex series of “nested stories” representing many different facets of my autobiographical experience and a variety of interactions with different individuals and sources (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000). My narrative research text will consist of a compilation of the following different story segments sequentially interwoven into the storyline to demonstrate how these interactions affected the narrative in real time:

The Historical Story

This narrative began long before my involvement in it, and the interaction between past definitions of narrative theory in a museum context and a contemporary understanding is an essential part of the story. In order to ground this study in its historical roots, I will compare the work of Lisa Roberts with my own, and I will highlight moments in the narrative sequence when her voice from the past influenced or paralleled my work in the present.

The Professional Story

My exploration of the relationship between narrative and art has its roots in my desire to improve my educational practice, so a primary part of the narrative will address my experiences as a museum educator seeking to understand how to provide a more rich learning experience for others. As such, you will see that a great deal of the summative narrative consists of story segments about my interactions with the professional museum world. Because all of the big questions that guided the path of inquiry and discovery were intended for practical use in the museum field, the main character in this story is the professional “me”.

The Personal Story

I have also taken to heart an important research concept taught to me by Robert Bullough and Stefinee Pinnegar (2001): “for public theory to influence educational practice it must be translated through the personal” (p. 15). This story would not be complete if I only shared the stories that address the question, “What does it mean to educate?”, because as an individual all along the way I have asked myself, “What does it mean to learn?” Therefore, I will also include many more personal stories about a very real narrative learning process that I lived, not as a museum professional, but as a human being experiencing the role that art played in my personal development.

The Cultural Story

In order to adequately tell the story of my exploration of the relationship between narrative and art, I also need to include the voices of influence provided by the museum culture surrounding me. My inquiry was fueled, in many cases, by the conflicts that arose by differences in educational philosophy ascribed to by my colleagues. My understanding of narrative has shifted as I have sought out mentorship and council, and as I have encountered the effects of

conflicted opinions on working teams. When I encounter a place in this narrative where one of these environmental influences is essential to the story, their interjection will appear as it would have in a Redbook belonging to one of my students. Their thoughts and input will appear as if they had been handed the Redbook and they had written in its pages themselves.

In order to preserve the narrative context so essential to a complete understanding, I will provide the reader with a sense of their identity in the story by providing a job title or role description instead of a name. It's not important for you to know who they were, rather to understand how their voice fit into the narrative landscape at the particular juncture. I will also pay particular attention to wording and language. When writing a representation of their thoughts, I will either adhere as closely to the words actually spoken in conversation as memory will allow, or utilize exact wording from text written by the individual.

The Theoretical Story

Because contemporary professional literature has influenced my understanding of the topic as much as any other experiential interaction, I will weave somewhat of a literature review into the text. You must understand, though, that these references will not be included as a part of the narrative to provide evidence for any theory I may appear to be developing. Clandinin and Connelly describe literature reviewed as “a kind of conversation between theory and life or, at least, between theory and the stories of live contained in the inquiry” (p. 41). That is precisely the role that literature has played in this study. It will not provide a foundation and will not prove a theory, but my conversations with others through their publications have impacted my learning process, and so these individuals have also “written” pages in the narrative of my professional life.

You must be aware, though, that as a natural human being, I do not limit my interactions by only conversing with museum folk. Likewise, in my explorations of the universe, I reach out and consult with a variety of disciplines on the same subject. Some researchers believe in validating their work through “triangulation”—in which they consult three different perspectives. I, like Laurel Richardson (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2008), personally prefer to approach the world from more than three angles, and “crystallize” my findings (p. 478). I will intentionally incorporate opinions on the subject from diverse disciplines in the hopes of creating a much deeper, more complex understanding of the topic, because that is what museum interpreters do. We bring to light the hidden relationships between things and forge connections, making sense of complex interactions (Tilden, 2007). The narrative of “narrative” touches a much broader expanse than the field of museum education and I believe that there are valuable lessons to be learned from others who have become engaged in the story.

A Re-Storying

At this point, I am beginning to anticipate some concern welling up inside of those of you who are reading about the Redbook project without ever having seen one. I know that right now it reads like this is going to be an extraordinarily long and complex text. That’s because you might be imagining the compilation of these various stories to be five full length volumes squashed into one giant book. Fortunately, that’s not how narrative research works.

I will not be telling any of these stories in their entirety. I will begin to synthesize all of the memories, conversations, and stories that I have collected through a thematic narrative analysis. I’ll pay special attention to recurrent patterns that run through all of these narratives and focus on a select number of short story segments from each that can be unified through paradigm thinking (Cresswell, 2007; Riesman, 2008). I will also identify short story segments

that represent key events or major epiphanies in understanding that have had a significant impact on understanding (Denzin, 1989b).

When I have selected all of these important story segments, I will “re-story” them into one general narrative format by piecing them together sequentially (Cresswell, 2007, p. 23-24, Riessman, 2008). Understanding how I have ordered the sequence of these stories will be key to reading the Redbook narrative. Some pieces of the theoretical, historical, or cultural narrative may appear to be out of order based on chronology because I am more interested in making sure that the causal chronology is represented well. I will insert each story segment into the experience where it became influential to the learning process.

Layered Interpretations

The Redbook Projects created by my former students were extremely rich in layered stories and thought processes, and that was a good beginning in narrative inquiry. Essentially, what they were doing was compiling in one place a record of all of the different field texts they were finding related to one story, idea, or phenomenon. In that sense, my own thesis is art-based narrative inquiry—because I will be using a creative writing format to record and collect my field texts.

The stories I will include will be layered, just as those in the Redbook were. It’s just that I will do it conceptually rather than physically so that by the time you encounter my final thesis, you will be able to read about how the different viewpoints and perspectives of different individuals were layered into my professional experience and thought processes one moment at a time.

If it is true that a true narrative based inquiry consists of three overlapping interpretations (the interpretation of the narrator or participant, the interpretation of the researcher, and the

interpretation of the reader), then my Redbook narrative is still lacking space for one vital interpretation.

As the individual recording my autobiographical narrative in the form of memories, I will fill the role of “narrator.” As the writer compiling, re-storying, and analyzing the collective Redbook narrative, I fill the role of “researcher”. Now it is important that you fill the role of “reader” and insert your own experiences with the subject of study and thoughts regarding my experiences into the Redbook Project.

My intent from the beginning of this narrative adventure has never been to stumble across some generalized truth about what narrative means in the context of an art museum, nor to imply that every searcher to explore the topic will have the same experience and come to the same conclusions as I did. This is simply a descriptive account of my own personal experience and exploration so that you might understand the meaning that I have made of it.

Making the Narrative Leap

I’m sure that you are wondering now why I went through so much effort to study out, write about, and justify an art-based and art-informed narrative inquiry methodology when the final product of my thesis could have easily been outlined as a simply autobiographical narrative inquiry. This narrative research text does not look like a visual art-based inquiry, nor is it heavily art-informed.

As is always the case with a narrative inquiry, every new experience shifts and alters and changes the course of learning—and the outcome. Part way through the writing of my thesis, I finally stumbled upon an epiphany and it completely shifted my understanding of the role that the methodology of art-informed narrative inquiry would play in my own story. Now, rather than guiding the final product of my thesis, my art-based narrative inquiry methodology will be

guiding the decisions I make in the future. Given the time constraints I am under, I had to choose between telling the limited story I had collected in the art-informed way I so thoroughly justified, or providing you with the text for an extended version of my narrative discovery. I chose the latter.

It may appear that I never fully made the kind of narrative leap I had hoped for. But, the physical product is of little consequence for the moment. That's a story to be written in the future. What is important is that you understand where my journey through the theory behind art-based and art-informed narrative inquiry had taken me, because, it was the process, not the product, of mentally working through the research methodology that eventually led me to a great epiphany. It was the learning process that allowed me to make a tremendous narrative leap in my understanding of how narrative theory applies to the day-to-day practice of museum education, and to me, that is infinitely more important.

Chapter Five Preface

Dear Reader,

It wasn't until I had the time to step back from my study of narrative inquiry as a research methodology that I was able to really explore the connection between my method of study and the subject at hand. After having written the last two chapters, I began to understand that the question I should have been asking was "What is the relationship between narrative inquiry and art museum education?" Having the right research question properly in place, the remainder of my study took a bit of a different turn.

In chapter five, you will really see the study and practice become completely integral as I explain the epiphany through which I began to understand how narrative inquiry was already a part of my everyday life. As I relate to you the story of my great narrative epiphany, you will be presented with insights into how the scholarly became relevant not only to ordinary human behavior but to art museum education practices as well.

In order to illustrate how all of the work I had done to prepare myself to begin my research eventually culminated in a novel understanding of my everyday work, I will narrate for you the moment of my epiphany when everything suddenly clicked and I began to see my research question in a different light. Rather than understanding interpretation as a storytelling process, I began to see museum education as the act of fostering a process of narrative inquiry.

Then, we will begin to explore what a narrative inquiry thought process really consists of by re-living a moment of art-informed narrative learning from my past. Having identified key elements of a narrative learning process, I will take you back into the museum gallery with me as I remember a moment in which I observed one method for effectively implementing a narrative art education theory that was already being practiced in the museum setting.

I hope that as you read, you will remember that the narrative inquiry based interpretive technique does not represent the only appropriate way to implement narrative learning theory in the museum free choice learning environment. It constitutes one possible way of helping museum visitors discover transformative experiences in the museum through story and through their own narrative inquiry process. As you read through my personal narrative experience, dig down into your own memory box of your own museum learning experiences and look for evidence of narrative thought processes. You never know what other possible answers to this research question will emerge.

The Museum Memory Box

“The kind of stories we embrace moves away from the world of brute facts toward the realm of human meanings....Imagine how we can think about and use art differently....art can be used not only as a mode of representation, but as a mode of inquiry.” (Bochner & Ellis, 2003, p. 509)

A Narrative Epiphany

She scurried through my office door, slid into the arms of my old rickety rocking chair, and folded her hands across her lap. “Sorry I’m so late,” she proclaimed, trying to catch her breath. “There was a docent in-service today and Al Young was here speaking to us about his work.” Her eyes still sparkled with the excitement of the experience she’d just come running from. “I knew that I was late for our meeting, but it was so incredibly fascinating that I just couldn’t tear myself away.”

I knew Al well, so I wasn’t at all surprised by the fact that she was captivated by his lecture. Most artists are deep in one way or another, and many are profound, but there was something so heartfelt about his manner that it made every dialogue feel extraordinarily personal. “I understand,” I said, “I would have stayed just to listen to him too. I could listen to Al Young talk all day.”

“The amazing part about his lecture was how much I just didn’t realize was there,” she said with a childlike tone of awe in her voice. “There’s so much personal content packed into every one of his pieces. *Every* little detail has some story attached to it that is full of personal meaning. Every symbol reflects a profound principle, and by the time he’s done telling you all of the stories contained in just one piece, you feel like you’ve been given some of life’s most precious wisdom. I wish I could think like he does, so deeply. Most people just don’t think like that.”

She was absolutely right, most people don't think like Al does--at least not every minute of every day like he does. But, I wished they did. The thing I knew about Al was that he didn't just approach his own artwork that way. He approached every experience in life that reflectively. And, it wasn't only Al, the entire Young family was overflowing with that kind of insight. They published a bi-monthly magazine called "The Storybook Home Journal". Each issue focused on ways in which elements of a selected novel from classic literature could be personalized and incorporated into ordinary life.

The Young Family would read a novel together, study the context in which it was set, and then step into the story by making recipes, playing music, and even re-creating a little nook of their home to fit the time period or specific events from the story. They had ship-bunk beds, a Little Women pantry, and even an elaborate mouse house built into one of their interior walls. They had taken little moments from hundreds of different novels and playfully woven them into the narrative threads of their lives.

And, what's more, you almost couldn't turn a corner without finding some symbol delicately worked into the decorative veneers of their home, reverentially appropriated from a story and deliberately placed as an eternal reminder of the insights they had gained from the stories of others. Their home became a living, dynamic work of art as they incorporated into it narrative elements that had become transformative in their lives. It was a continuous running dialogue that spanned the ages, integrating hundreds of voices: ancient and modern, fictitious and living, all of which were re-interpreted through the artistic voices of the Young Family.

To "live richly", that was the goal (Al Young Studios, 2012). And they accomplished that by finding personal meaning in every story and experience they encountered and weaving them into an intricate network of conceptual connections that became the fabric of their lives.

On my first visit, I had been absolutely mesmerized by The Storybook Home. It was magical and whimsical, but ultimately so richly layered with content and meaning that I felt edified every time I turned a corner. The paintings of Al Young were small portable samples of this lifelong masterpiece, and so I understood very well the sentiment this docent tried to express.

“I mean, it’s like you,” she said, as I suddenly realized that I’d become lost in a Storybook Home daydream. “You can do that too. You look at a work of art and just see in it all of these deeper meanings and connections to the world. There are a lot of people who can interpret, but when you tell your stories related to a work of art, it changes people. You must have been born thinking that way. It’s quite a gift to be able to see that kind of depth in things. That’s not the kind of thing you just learn.”

I think that if circumstances had been different, I would have considered that five minute clip of conversation the greatest compliment that I could ever receive. But instead, it troubled me. I’d spent the last many months hearing over and over again from the new docent trainees that thinking interpretively was easy for me because I just instinctively thought that way. “I’m a left brained, analytical guy,” I could hear one of them saying in my head. “This stuff comes naturally to you, but my brain just can’t think that way.”

I sat back in my chair pondering that statement for some time after she left. If interpretation is indeed not a teachable art as promised by Freeman Tilden (2007), then what was my purpose as an educator? Do people have to be born with it if they want to have artsy eyes and meaning making minds? Was I really born thinking this way? And then I remembered that I didn’t always feel capable of thinking like Al Young would, either. I wasn’t born an interpreter.

As a seventeen-year-old high school student, I sat in the art classroom and watched the chattering cluster of students at the end of my table talk about the deep meanings they had

layered into their expressive paintings. I looked down at the photo-realistic graphite drawing in front of me. I had painstakingly copied it from a photo torn out of the National Geographic. I wondered what book the symbols they were using came from and how they decided that those symbols could also apply to their lives. They were real artists. I wished that I had been born thinking deeply like that. One of the girls turned my direction and asked what my work of art was about. I shoved the torn magazine page under my illustration board and said, "It's a picture of a whale." She asked why I chose a whale, and all I could say was, "I liked it."

I could recall countless experience like that. I could still remember the prints we were discussing in my college art criticism class when I realized that all of the other art students could look at works of art and see stories and symbols in them and just know exactly what they meant. They could read things into them that no one else saw and find personal connections they came up with on their own. I remember knowing that I was missing a skill set that real artists seemed to have.

1. But, what skill was I missing then that people thought seemed to come so naturally to me now? What was it that this docent seemed to think Al Young and I had in common? We had both had art-based experiences that were very transformative in our lives and believed in the power of art to have the same kind of impact on the lives of others.
2. We both consistently connected art with story.

So, that was it, huh? We were both storytellers, visual storytellers.

"But, I've got a whole building full of storytellers," I thought, "and I'm looking for an even more powerful interpretive experience than that. We need to 'live richly' in our museum, like they do in The Storybook Home. That is a really valuable art-based experience for everyone who visits."

Part of the power of The Storybook Home was that it wasn't just about illustrating stories, and it wasn't just about constructing a story around a work of art. The Youngs lived art-based and art-informed lives. They were continually choreographing an intricate educational dance that involved three processes: learning from the creations of others, gaining new insights by creating visual narratives of their own, and sharing with others the insights they had gleaned from their experiences in the form of visual art.

Because their work was the product of both art-based and art-informed learning, it wasn't just a one-time experience that was displayed and viewed in a gallery. They were creations to be reconsidered in numerous dialogues over and over again. Their work was about making connections. It was about finding personal significance in art. It wasn't just about taking something in. It was about taking symbols or ideas and making them your own. It was about letting someone else's story merge with your life in such a way that it changed the way you lived and way you perceived the world. It was more like a three-dimensional Redbook...ahhh...

It wasn't about story. It was about narrative.

Narrative and story are not the same thing. How was it that I didn't realize that before?

Most people use the terms story and narrative synonymously, but they are two very different constructs. A story is a retelling of an experience or event. It's linear, sequential, and has a beginning, middle, and end (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Narrative is defined as "retrospective meaning making" (Chase, 2008 p. 64). As described by Susan Chase (2008), "Narrative is a way of understanding one's own and others' actions, of organizing events and objects into a meaningful whole, and of connecting and seeing the consequences of actions over time" (p. 64). A story is an "account of something that has happened, that communicates a particular message or moral" (Frykman, 2009, p. 301).

The story is the product. Narrative is the process one goes through to make sense of the experience and translate it into a story. Narrative is an activity rather than an outcome. It is the active process of meaning making.

That's what it was! That's what was so different about the way that Al Young thinks! He thinks narratively! He is never just taking information into his brain, but always processing everything to find its personal meaning. For Al and me, interpreting a work of art was not a one-time discussion in a gallery setting. It was an ongoing process of discovery. We were continually returning to the dialogue with new insights that might alter our understanding, and in turn, shape who we were becoming.

That thought reminded me of something my little sister said to me once while we were on a grand adventure, "This isn't a vacation to you. It's like a research project. Everything in life is like one big research project to you." Ah-ha! That was it! We approached everyday learning in much the same way that I had decided to approach my research for my masters' thesis.

We were always actively engaged in an informal lifelong autobiographical art-based and art-informed narrative inquiry.

That was the methodology that my docent was so inspired by. It was the practice that Al Young's artwork was made out of. It was the process that constructed The Storybook Home. It was the research my gallery interpretations were based upon and the art education methodology that has created transformative moments for so many.

The art museum education methodology that would create my "storybook museum" was not storytelling. It was art-informed narrative inquiry.

A Narrative Inquiry Art Museum

It actually wasn't until after I'd had my great epiphany about the role that narrative inquiry could play in the museum setting that I discovered Lisa Roberts' book "From Knowledge to Narrative". I had read plenty of literature about constructive learning theories that sounded remarkably familiar to Clandinin and Connelly's narrative inquiry model of scholarly research. But, I needed to know if an art-informed narrative inquiry methodology could feasibly be integrated into an art museum setting. I didn't even know that someone had already provided a rationale for the use of a narrative educational philosophy until I started seeking corroborating evidence for my own idea. So initially, I began by looking for good evidence by comparing the research methodology to my daily life at the museum. I looked back at my analysis of the Redbook project to identify the conditions required to make up a three-dimensional narrative learning space. I almost laughed out loud when I saw what I had written:

Narrative inquiry occurs within the context of a three-dimensional space:

1. Interaction allows us to look "inward and outward" through an integration of personal insight and socially constructed learning.
2. Continuity enhances understanding by allowing us to look "backward and forward", embracing temporality.
3. Situation reminds us to look "around" at the place and physical circumstances that help define a holistic learning experience.

A good three-dimensional narrative learning space is inclusive of: situation or place, continuity and temporality over time, and personal and social interaction. How did I get all the way through a chapter defining this three-dimensional learning space without immediately arriving at my major epiphany? Why did that take me so long?

The Contextual Model of Learning developed by John Falk and Lynn Dierking has been cited as the most comprehensive theory in museum education and is the most widely practiced (Ebitz, 2007). I was very familiar with the theory because it was outlined in the first professional book I was given as a guide to my career and it became a part of my everyday life. Their theory stated that learning takes place in three contexts: the personal, the sociocultural, and the physical, and that “learning is a dialogue between the individual and his or her environment through time” (Falk & Dierking, 2000, p. 136).

My narrative research methodology, and the Contextual Model of Learning seemed to be almost identical. Metaphorically speaking, the museum was already a prime three-dimensional narrative learning space. Because of the constructivist nature of the contextual model for museum education, contemporary museum educators had already been trained to think like narrative inquirers.

Would that rationale be enough to justify narrative inquiry as a museum educational theory to some of the senior educators and curators I worked with? Many of them considered the Contextual Model of Learning to be very elementary and foundational. It was considered a theory for entry level educators who were just learning and getting a grasp on things. Even if I could convince them that it was more applicable than some other ethereal concepts, I knew that my colleagues had dismissed the work of John Falk and Lynn Dierking as theory that could be applied in history exhibits, but just wasn't applicable to the educational programs and exhibitions designed for art museums. My personal opinion was that corroborating theories from two different fields might be able to justify the validity of one another.

Besides, I had come to the conclusion that art and history weren't so different after all. In the end, we as human beings approach them similarly anyway. In essence, they are to us objects

that communicate meaning. S. Sontag said that art is “an instrument for modifying consciousness and organizing new modes of sensibility” (as cited in DeMello, 2007). It doesn’t matter whether we’re looking at an artifact or a work of art--in our quest for understanding, they all become texts to us, texts to interact with, to analyze, and to construct experientially based stories around (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

I had remembered reading once through a list I’d made of the different kinds of field texts that could be collected and analyzed in narrative inquiry-based research (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Cresswell, 2007, Riessman, 2008): research journals, interview notes, daily field notes, autobiographical writing, letters, works of art, recorded interviews, conversations, introspection, audio-visual media, photographs, personal possessions, social artifacts, ritual objects, historical objects, memories, memory boxes...

The list continued, but my mind had moved on, because I was so intrigued by the fact that I could find a sample of one of each of those things in most museums. I had come across a quote many months ago in my research that I had noted as an interesting connection between my two interests: museums and narrative. I clicked through my computer files and opened up my research notes. There it was, in my notes on the writings of Clandinin and Connelly (2000):

Archives and museums have a similar role to play in narrative inquiry concerned with exploring social narratives....These small museums became a kind of memory box, a collection that expressed the social narrative of their community. (p. 114)

There it was, from the mouths of the narrative experts. I just hadn’t understood then how that statement could apply to an art museum. But I was finally beginning to make the connection. The entire museum is a memory box. And it wasn’t just the history museum that could be considered a memory box full of artifacts. The art museum was a memory box as well. It was

one big box full of art, and photographs, and texts that can and should act as field texts through which our visitors could explore their relationship with the world. I mean, our curators used the contents of our collections as field texts every day, carefully analyzing the stories they had to tell and piecing them back together into one larger narrative presented in the form of a research text that we call an exhibition (Hooper-Greenhill, 2007).

“Wait,” I thought, “If our curators are already engaged in the process of creating narrative exhibits for our visitors, how would my narrative inquiry art museum be any different from what we already have?”

It was at about this point in my thought process that I actually really began to delve into Lisa Roberts’ writings on narrative theory (1997). It was her book that reminded me once again of this simple truth: “Education is not just about museums teaching visitors; it is about visitors using museums in ways that are personally significant to them (p. 132). She reminded educators everywhere that visitors’ experiences are shaped as much by who they are as by what museums teach them. Her work reminded me that no matter what story we share, visitors are actively engaged in making their own meaning of their museum experience, and because they all bring a unique set of experiences to the museum with them, they will all leave having received a different message (p. 136-137).

Then, she explained why it was that many museums, just like ours, were only half-way engaged in a narrative endeavor. Yes, our curators were effectively using the pieces in our collection as field texts to create a narrative experience for our visitors. But, that was where we began making efforts to become narratively focused, and also where we failed at really providing a narrative experience. She explained:

For the most part, however, attention to visitors' values, goals, and current knowledge has largely been driven by interest in improving the transmission of the museum narrative; the visitor's narrative, while acknowledged, continues to be regarded as something private, accidental, and therefore beyond the scope of museum attention and practice. For those visitors who either do not understand the museum narrative or who are so uncomfortable with the setting as to be unable to construct their own narrative, the museum becomes a place to be avoided. (p. 140)

After reading that statement, it occurred to me that very often even I was guilty of that. When we created exhibits and programs that would tell a story, we still weren't exchanging narratives. We had written our story and our primary goal was to share it (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, Roberts, 1997). We viewed our narrative as a story completely written at the time of installation, not an interpretive experience that was still in process.

Like many curators and most educators in contemporary museums today, we professed to be making a narrative shift, but we were still focused on content. A true narrative is in process. And we had forgotten the power of allowing that process to become personal. As stated by Marlene Chambers, we needed to focus more on how we could "inspire visitors to discover and construct their own narratives" (Chambers, 2003, p. 154).

Our primary question as an educational institution should not be how we can most effectively teach content, rather how we can foster the individual meaning making process (Hooper-Greenhill, 2000; Roberts, 1997). If we want visitors to use our museum in ways that are personally meaningful to them, our primary goal for our museum experience should be teaching them how to engage in their own personal process of constructing an art-informed narrative inquiry (Roberts, 1997).

“Teaching narrative learning process, not content,” I thought, “that would be a pretty radical shift. What does the narrative inquiry process look like and how am I going to teach it?”

A Narrative Conflict

I had only the equivalent of five U.S. dollars in my pocket, and it wasn't going to be enough. That was strategic planning on my part. I deliberately left all but this small amount behind for two reasons: I didn't want to be out much cash if I was mugged, and I was restricting my expenditures so that I wouldn't make the mistake again of traveling home with a lot of useless junk.

So, now, here I was standing in the dusty red walkway outside a greedy craftsman's booth, trying very hard to act disinterested in a beautiful wooden carving of an African woman that I had absolutely fallen in love with. We were hours away from our home base. And since we had no car and precious little travel time, it would be a miracle if I ever made it back there with more money. I was a terrible bargainer, but I had to try to haggle for this one, because I wasn't going home without her. My sister, a much shrewder business woman, went in to do my dirty work. But, the craftsman had seen me pass five times to steal a glance at his handiwork and knew my heart was set, so he refused to lower the price.

A few weeks later, my sister and I sacrificed an entire day of jungle adventure to catch our only chance at a ride back to that cultural market. The craftsman recognized my face and knew he had me hooked, so he charged me six times what the sculpture was worth. But, I left the market rejoicing. The price would be well worth it.

Before I left home for Africa, I had stumbled across a story about the women of Africa that touched me in a way I never wanted to forget. An influential leader from a Christian church had traveled from America to visit West Africa. During her stay, she became intrigued by the

many African women she saw walking along the side of the road carrying heavy loads in baskets on their heads for miles through the heat of the day. She noted that although these women had so little and carried such heavy burdens, they were always smiling and always expressing their joy. One day, at a church gathering, she asked a group of women to tell her about their unique challenges. After some time of silence, one of the women responded stating that they had trials, but because they had faith in Jesus Christ, they were happy (Dew, 2005).

I think that story touched me so deeply because I had so much more than they did by way of temporal goods in my life, but for so long I had felt like I carried a heavy load of unhappiness. Yet these women who had walked through trials much heavier than my own had learned to find joy through their faith, in spite of the burdens they bore. I determined then that I wanted go to Africa to learn from the women there how to have that kind of faith. I carried that story with me all the way to Ghana.



Figure 5.1. *Woman Walking with Faith*, Unknown Artist, Wooden Carving, 2007

The first time I saw that sleek, dark wooden carving of a Ghanaian woman, it almost moved me to tears. There she stood, my African muse, gracefully balancing a large basket on her head with ease while tenderly attending to her children. She stood there, glistening in the hot midday sun, a perfect symbol of all the life lessons that I had managed to glean from my African experience. It didn't matter how much I had to pay to take her home with me. She would forever stand in my home as a visual reminder of the person I wanted to become. I entitled my little wooden carving "Woman Walking with Faith".

Shortly after I returned home, my work at the museum introduced me to a sister sculpture from Nigeria that looked just like the one I had purchased. I studied her fondly remembering the experiences I had in Africa, the women I had learned from, and the story that had taken me there. Because I had associated a whole series of meanings with my little wooden carving, from the moment I laid eyes on this new work of art, I assumed that it too embodied those very same principles.

Then, I read the quote provided from an oral history interview with the woman who owned it. This interpretation was perplexing to me. Not because I didn't understand its meaning, but because this time the carving was interpreted for me by a woman of West African descent. Instead of recognizing her carving as an inspiring representation of a strong woman of conviction walking with faith, she had referred to it as "The Third World".

To her, it was a memory of the way she felt women were treated in African society. It carried a connotation of subservience, second-class status, and abuse. When viewed in the context of her socio-cultural context, it told the story of far too many African women who single handedly bore all of the physical and economic burdens of raising and caring for a family but were given no voice in a marital relationship.



Figure 5.2. *The Third World*, C.K. Nuku, Wooden Carving, 1998

I had seen this woman as a noble, strong creature who refused to allow her trials to disable her. She trusted that God had a plan for her life, and because of that, she bore her burdens joyfully. The African interpreter described a weak and oppressed gender and used that crafted image as the basis for a call to action. She thought that instead of just accepting the burden and enduring it joyfully, these women needed to seek liberation from the injustices placed upon them.

We often speak of affective aesthetic experiences as gloriously uplifting emotional sensations. This one was rather devastating for me. The one source I could always look to as a symbol of all things joyful and uplifting, she had just filled with the awareness of destructive oppressive tendencies. I was grappling with two conflicting interpretations of the same sculpture

and I desperately needed mine to be right, or else I risked losing every beautiful truth I had gained on my soul-searching trip to Africa.

I don't pretend to imagine that every individual who enters our museum will encounter an experience this dramatic. And, I certainly hope that if they do, it will not be such a traumatic event. Often, the disparity between the visitor narrative and the museum narrative is no more complex a conflict than a meeting between the "familiar and the unknown" (Bruner, 1996). But, as Marlene Chambers said (2003), "It is only when experience challenges our expectations that we stop to examine our currently held intellectual construct about the world and, building upon past meanings, create a new world of meaning (p. 154). So, I do hope that eventually we will reach a point where many of them at least encounter, in some form, a narrative conflict such as the one I've just described, because that's the first step to becoming engaged in an art-informed narrative inquiry.

Before this critical juncture in the story, I was simply observing a work of art. I was a passive spectator. But, like all visitors, I had come to the museum with an entrance narrative and the stories of my past affected the way I interpreted my museum experience (Falk & Dierking, 2000). I was perfectly secure in my own knowledge and understanding of the meaning that sculpture conveyed. I was content with the narrative I had constructed and didn't really ever intend to learn much more about it, because I felt like my knowledge was complete (Doering & Pekarik, 2000).

Then, I was introduced to the story that had been constructed around that work of art and I came to know first-hand why storytelling, although not a complete narrative experience, is such an effective strategy for creating an atmosphere of inquiry. That story helped me do as Bruner (1996) suggested all people should be able to do in a museum setting, it helped me to "find the

place, the intersection between the familiar and the unknown, where genuine learning occurs (p. 33).

I had found the one place in the museum where learning and meaning making occur best: the place where the museum's narrative had intersected with my own (DuToit, 2011). I was coming to know this work of art-based on my own memories and experiences, and I was beginning to weave my own story around it. But, where our two stories diverged, I could not make a positive connection. My meaning making efforts ground to a quick halt. In my mind, these two stories could not be reconciled.

I was dealing with two different versions of the world, and because of the context in which each story was constructed, they were both equally valid. But, for some reason, rather than just accepting that two different stories could exist, I felt unsettled because they didn't match up. Lisa Roberts (1997) explained my dilemma as such, "In the real, lived world, however, different versions conflict....Multiple worlds may work epistemologically; empirically, they create enormous tension, as people struggle to live and to think as they will" (p. 133). I was feeling that tension, and all I wanted was to have the story I'd been holding on to for so long validated (Doering & Pekarik).

If I was a typical visitor, unaccustomed to interactions with art interpretation or narrative inquiry, I may have left feeling unsure of my experience, and unstable in my understanding of the world (Doering & Pekarik, 1996). Even as someone who engages in the world of interpretation often, in order to feel satisfied, I wanted the museum's story to resonate with my own and confirm my understanding of the world, just as any visitor would (Doerine & Pekarik, 1996).

In that moment, when confronted with the uncomfortable necessity of trying to negotiate these differing narratives, I, just like any other typical visitor, may have resorted to a number of different negotiating strategies. I could have chosen passive resistance to the new narrative and decided not to continue interacting with the work of art or participating in the museum dialogue. Or I could have chosen to evade the conflict by ignoring it, or disguising my emotions toward it, pretending like the tension didn't concern me (Choi, 2010).

But, if, at this point, I had chosen to ignore my confusion or opted out of the interpretive experience, I would have ended the learning process before I had even begun, and that is what concerns me. It is highly likely that visitors who were not as experienced with the interpretive world would have considered the museum voice an authoritative one and felt they had no alternative but to take in the information and resort to one of these three strategies for negotiation.

It is at this point in the experience that we need to help visitors understand that the place where narratives collide is not the end of the conversation, rather only the very beginning of the learning process. As Lisa Roberts said (1997):

It is out of that tension that the task of education arises. It is there that the task of constructing meaning—through observing, comparing, and evaluating possible versions of the world—really begins...It is this moment of conflict that is the business of education, because out of conflict comes the need to consider the sense in which revised or alternative world versions may be valid. (p. 133)

At the intersection of personal and museum narrative, it becomes crucial for the visitor to choose to suspend disbelief long enough to become engaged in active narrative inquiry (Choi, 2010; Du Toit & Dye, 2008). As explained by Du Toit & Dye (2008):

By this is meant that the visitor actively reaches out to new knowledge contained within the exhibition and its narratives, and contextualizes significant affective and cognitive percepts through a process of appropriation, assimilation, accommodation, and identification skills. (p. 73-74)

If they will suspend their disbelief long enough to become engaged in the process of inquiry, then they may encounter a transformative experience that culminates in tremendous personal growth.

Re-Writing My Personal Narrative

Being an experienced interpreter, I decided to actively inquire on my own. I went in search of all the information I could find. In our collection I discovered a series of oral history interviews conducted with other women of West African descent. I read the stories of women who lived there during three different decades. I read the stories of Americans who visited as missionaries and could offer an outsider's perspective. I read all of their accounts about the role of women in West African society and many things they had to say about how they dealt with their struggles, and I compared each of them to my story and to the story the museum had presented me with.

In the end, I came to a conclusion that I had not really hoped for, nor expected. Each of the stories I considered to be in conflict were echoed in the voices of others, and in fact, they were really two parts of the same story.

It was true that in the past, the women of West Africa were treated as subservient and many felt like they were oppressed (Ames, 2010). That cultural tradition became a heavy burden that those women bore. No, they did not have the kind of faith born of trust in God that allowed them to carry that burden with joy, in spite of their external circumstances. Instead, they used

their faith to give them the confidence they needed to walk forward proactively and change their circumstances (Ames, 2011).

That seems like a small shift in understanding to anyone living outside my personal story. But, to me it was tremendous. For so many years, I'd been looking to that artistic symbol as a reminder that if I felt burdened, I needed to find joy, in spite of the circumstances that surrounded me. That little reminder had served me well for quite some time as I learned how to overcome some emotional trials. But, in the last few years, my circumstance had shifted. Recreating my understanding of what it meant to be a "Woman Walking with Faith" really did help change the course of my life.

I could understand what those women felt like. I knew what it was like to feel as though your gender dictated your role in a community. I knew what it meant to feel like you'd had an unjust load of responsibility piled up on your head, but been denied the power to carry it. I understood what it felt like to stand alone. Hearing the museum's version of the story for the first time felt foreign, but having learned more, I found myself swimming in a sea of emotions and memories that reminded me just how familiar that story really was.

I went home from the museum and placed my "Woman Walking with Faith" on a table in the center of the room. I grabbed a sketchpad and a pencil and started to sketch out an image of my beloved African carving, but as I began to sketch, her features began to take on a different dimension. Pale white arms and legs emerged from underneath her layers of vibrant African cloth, and instead of being wrapped in yards of colorful fabric, her head was adorned with my long golden curls.

Like the woman in the carving, my figure was pregnant, only she carried the burden of having to prepare now for what others were planning for my future. The child reaching up to her

expecting nourishment and support took on many pleading hands, the hands of all the existing responsibilities that had been given me which demanded so much of my time and attention. On her hip, she bore not one child, but all of the people I felt I had to carry along the way. And sitting atop her head was a basket filled with the daily workload I had to manage to provide for myself monetarily.

I stopped drawing and suddenly realized that the story had shifted again. I was the African woman feeling so abused and oppressed. But where was my African mentor? I had more than one mentor now. I had the stories of many different African women and each of them found a different way to rise above the way that women were treated in their society and actually create a place within their world where they would be treated differently than that. Individually, they'd each taught me a technique I could use to enact change. Collectively, they'd taught me how to empower myself from within.

Then I recalled a beautiful little bronze piece from Ghana that I'd seen hanging in the museum gallery. It was a very stylized relief depicting a string of women holding hands and dancing together as they worshiped God. The artist's story said that these women were supporting each other and helping one another as they all reached heavenward. I logged on to the museum website to remind myself what that image looked like. I committed it to memory and then, very slowly, I sketched those figures into my drawing, carefully placing them in a circle beneath me, each with her arms stretched out bearing me up in a tender embrace. And then, I erased the basket sitting on my head and drew it in again, only this time I was lifting the load high above my head with ease.

My drawing never became anything more than a simple sketch. But, it was a sketch that altered my outlook on life. Now, in addition to the constant encouragement I received from my

treasured sculpture, I had a new vision of what it meant to walk with faith. That visual narrative was not the only story that I constructed that day.



Figure 5.3. *Charity Dance*, Helen Izeubigie, Cast Bronze, 1975



Figure 5.4. *Narrative Re-Storying Sketch*, Angela Ames, Pencil on Paper, 2010

Through the process of its creation, I also pieced together a vision of how I could change my circumstance in the future. My museum experience initially shattered the narrative understanding I had constructed around my “Woman Walking with Faith”. But, through the process of trying to piece it back together, I began to understand that there are multiple versions of the world and that the reality of the story is always changing and shifting. I began to believe that there could be a lot of possible endings for the same story. If that was true for the women of Africa, then I had determined that it must be possible for the story of my life, too. So, I walked forward with a mind open to the possibility of enacting change.

The story of my narrative inquiry did not end with the completion of that drawing. It has become a continual journey of discovery over the last five years of my life. I still find myself making connections between my “Woman Walking with Faith” and the new experiences that occur in my life. The story is like a running thread and as it gradually progresses onward, I continue to appropriate new images, symbols, thoughts and ideas from seemingly unrelated stories to tie into to my narrative.

Looking back on the process of my exploration of the African narratives, I initially diagnosed it as a self-taught emotional coping mechanism. I had explored some art therapy theories, and recently I’d been studying the integration of art and narrative therapy. It seemed to me like I had instinctively followed a lot of the steps outlined to help heal myself: I encountered a problem, brought forth a dominant personal story, deconstructed the stories I was presented with, and then re-authored a new story with a unique outcome specific to my personal life (Carlson, 1997; Dunn-Snow & D’Amelio, 2000; Riley, 1997). But, it was missing some key therapeutic elements and this process wasn’t brought about by some emotional need or sorrow,

the affective rewards just a conflict of artistic interpretations. It came about as the result of the integration of an art-based and an art-informed learning process. Although it was a part of my ordinary live, it was an inclusive visual art narrative inquiry.

But, after that day in my office when I realized that Al Young interacted with art like a narrative inquirer, I realized that my experience with African art was an example of what the art-based and informed narrative inquiry process might look like in a museum setting. I may not have been in the process of creating a physical “book”, but in effect I was working through a Redbook process. I was living in a three-dimensional narrative space (Clandinin and Connelley, 2000).

- In the present, I was looking at a work of art on display and reading a story about it in the description.
- I looked backward to the past and remembered the story that helped me ascribe my own interpretation to it.
- I looked inward to discover the personal reasons why I struggled with the museum’s narrative. Later, I looked inward to try to understand how the new story could relate to my present life.
- I looked outward to understand the social significance that one woman’s interpretation might have in the context of the lives of many other women from West Africa.
- I looked forward to puzzle about how the new meaning this African Sculpture took on could apply to the context of my personal life.

I had read that if you want to understand a skill, you should study the processes of those who possess it, and the docents had just identified me as someone this process comes naturally to (Henay, 2007). And, I really wanted to understand what a visual art narrative inquiry process

looked like in the museum setting. So, I compared my experience to the process that scholarly narrative inquiry researchers engage in hoping to be able to identify a good model for an visual art narrative inquiry process that we could focus on in the museum.

“Narrative inquiry research seems complicated,” I told myself, “but in its essence, the process that narrative researchers go through boils down to four steps:

1. Narrative researchers collect a range of stories from research participants in the form of field texts (field texts can be broadly defined for an art-based/art-informed narrative inquiry) (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000); Creswell, 2007; Reissman, 2008).
2. They include a record of their own personal thoughts, and memories related to the subject of study as are recalled or become relevant to research. (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).
3. They analyze all of the stories they have collected thematically looking for similarities or differences. (Reissman, 2008).
4. Then, they negotiate the meaning of the stories together through the process of re-storying them into one cohesive narrative (Cresswell, 2007; Reissman, 2008).

I had done all of those things. I just hadn't formally documented them or written the outcome in a formal research text. I also discovered that because of the informal and sometimes spontaneous nature of the museum learning environment, I had been through a small-scale version of this process. However, in the true narrative spirit, my research had never ended. I continued to repeat the process time and time again adding one new insight here, and re-writing something there. That's why the process looked like it happened a little out of order.

When I experienced it in a museum setting, an visual art narrative learning process appeared to be a little different on the surface, but it was really just a personalized, extended version of the same core principles, I was sure of it. I just couldn't quite pin-point how to break

that process down into specific tasks I could engage visitors in. The process itself was made up of the same key strategies, but they didn't always happen in a structured or sequential order. The components worked together in a dynamic and flexible way. I just applied them as the opportunity was presented or as I needed them in response to specific needs I came across in the meaning making process. There were five basic pieces of the process I found myself coming back to over and over again.

Suspend Disbelief

Before I could be ready to engage in a narrative inquiry process, I had to discover an intersection between my personal narrative and a story being shared by the museum. In this moment, when the information the museum presented to me was unfamiliar and new to me, I had to choose to suspend my disbelief long enough to actively explore further the stories surrounding the work of art (Du Toit & Dye 2011). But, suspending my disbelief was not a one-time affair. I had to remain open to seeking out and taking in any other new stories and pieces of art that might offer further insight into my understanding.

Call Upon Memories

Like most visitors, I relied heavily on my memories to make meaning of my museum experience (Roberts, 1997; Silverman, 1983). Initially, I used my memories to help me understand what I thought and expected my experience with the sculpture would be like by attempting to place the sculpture within the context of my own experience. Memories of special knowledge I had about Africa, my experiences with a similar subject matter, and my own life events were the first thing I relied on to help me form an initial connection with the work of art (Silverman, 1983).

Later, I recalled many more of my personal experiences from memories as I sought to find a connection to the new stories I had taken in. Calling upon my memories helped me assess my understanding of the world at the time and my attitude and feelings toward the new information I found in the museum.

Compare Stories

Having encountered a world view that collided with my own, I began to compare the African woman's story with mine, in an attempt to evaluate both possible versions of the world (Chambers, 2003). It was helpful to collect stories from several different voices so that I could see the contrast that existed between multiple versions. It opened my mind to an understanding of just how many correct interpretation of this work of art there could be. Some of the stories I compared were written on text panels or presented in oral-history format. Others I discovered in the form of visual art. I deconstructed each of these possible interpretations, including my own, in an effort to be able to assess the relative value of each story when placed in the context that surrounded it (Chambers, 2003). I took apart each piece of the visual representation trying to understand what the different elements symbolized to each of us and why.

After I had found a compromise between the two possible interpretations of the African sculpture, I started searching for similarities between the experiences happening in my life at that time with the new story I was trying to take in. It helped me find a place in my life where the new interpretation of my sculpture could merge with my previous understanding of the world so that I could apply what I had learned to my life (Du Toit & Dye, 2008). The process of deconstructing my old interpretation of my "Woman Walking with Faith" helped me let go of some of my old beliefs and make room for new information that I could learn from (Dunn-Snow & D'Amelio, 2000).

Imagine Possibilities

Once I had decided that my own interpretation of my “Woman Walking with Faith” was not complete, I needed to understand for myself what other interpretations might exist that could potentially be more encompassing. I allowed my mind to play with different combinations of the interpretations I’d heard and associated new ideas or images with the sculpture. Imagining things I’d never believed could be true before allowed me the freedom to make connections between other stories that I never would have even considered could be related. It allowed me the freedom to appropriate symbols or ideas from other African works of art that could contribute to the story (Du Toit & Dye, 2008).

While comparing stories allowed me to assess differences between them, imagining new possibilities helped me form connections between ideas or images and integrate them into one new view. Feeling free to use my imagination and dream up relationships that could exist between things also helped me process and order the new information I had so that I could fully understand it. Being able to see the relationship between my “Woman Walking with Faith” sculpture and “The Third World Woman” helped me give new meaning to my prized possession (Hooper-Greenhill, 2007).

In the art therapy world, they say that “imagination helps individuals reorganize patterns and perceptions on a canvas or in their thoughts and belief system” (Dunn-Snow & D’Amelio, 2000). Eventually, it really was my artistic, imaginative play with sketching that helped me understand how all the little pieces I had scattered before me could fit together.

Re-Story Information

After the world of understanding I had created around my little wooden sculpture had been all torn apart, and I had sorted through the pieces--keeping some, discarding others, and

matching up what was left with similar pieces I'd found out in the world--then it was time to compile it all into a new narrative. I reorganized all of those little connections I had made into a broader framework (Creswell, . Then, I constructed a new understanding of that work of art, of myself, and of the world around me, and just like all narrative inquirers, I pieced it together out of prior versions of the story (Roberts, 1997). In the process, my old beliefs weren't destroyed, but they were forever altered so that new ideas could emerge (Dunn-Snow & D'Amelio, 2000).

In the process of re-writing the story I wanted to build around the African sculptures, I found myself re-storying my own personal narrative as well. I had remembered instances in my life that related to my new understanding and imagined new possible solutions to the conflicts I was struggling to resolve in my personal story. As I physically re-created a visual representation of my re-storying process, I began to forge connections between my personal life and the lessons I'd learned from this art-informed (and now art-based) narrative process. It was that playful reconstructive process made helped me see how the sculpture I found at the museum could become a very important part of my life at the time and it turned my museum narrative conflict into a transformative experience (Ebitz, 2007).

By the time I had come to recognize my experience as a narrative inquiry process and broken it down into a series of strategies, I had already re-storied that narrative three times. I'm quite certain that I'll take this narrative thread through the inquiry process over and over again throughout my life time.

What I had not completely figured out quite yet was how to re-story my understanding of this narrative process relates to the museum experience. I was still haunted by that one big question: "Is a visual art narrative inquiry process teachable?" It seemed to me to be such a very complex process even for someone experienced in art interpretation to become engaged in on

their own. The whole process sounded to me like it belonged in the fifth stage of Abigail Housen's Visual thinking Strategies, while storytelling was a strategy for novices at stage one. (Housen, 2007).

If that was the case, then I was trying to ask visitors to make the leap from "story" to "narrative inquiry" on their first visit while Housen's research asserts that visitors at stage five must have a long history of viewing and reflecting on art. Most of our visitors were novices with little to no experience with viewing art at all; at least not in a museum or interpretive setting. Did that mean that even if we shifted our focus from disseminating content to teaching process, they would not be able to make this narrative leap?

An Art Museum Narrative Inquiry Process

Not long ago, a new curator joined the ranks of our museum staff. She came to us from an art museum, and the real blessing was that her first love was education. For years she had been a senior educator at a much larger institution and had worked among an education staff that was very well versed in their theory.

It had been long enough since my internship at the museum that I had forgotten how it felt to transition into a history dominant world until I had to watch as she sorted through the same philosophical battle I'd managed to survive. Having been there before, I knew exactly where she was coming from when she started to express concerns about the interpretive techniques we were using to train our docents. But being much less experienced, I wished that I could explain the entire thought process I'd just been through so she could see where I was stuck and point me in the right direction.

I had just finished giving my one hour docent training presentation on interpreting art through storytelling for the third training in a row when she was asked to present a follow-up

session providing the docents with content information about the art in our galleries and returned to tell me about the experience she'd just had.

“I can't even get them to talk to me about art. They just sat there silently.” she said wide eyed. “They feel so ill prepared. But they just soak up the art content. They are so starved for art that they are just begging me to come back and talk to them about art.”

I wasn't quite sure whether to laugh or cry. She was right, it was troublesome. Even after all the curriculum adjustments we'd tried to make, it seemed like nothing had changed since the first day I picked up the old docent training curriculum. But, at this moment, I just felt elated to hear someone else finally voice the same opinion that I had been struggling with for so many years.

Fortunately, with experience comes expertise. Shortly after our exchange, she was invited to take the docents on a gallery stroll of one of our new exhibits. In an effort to help broaden their interpretive expertise, she provided them with the content they were seeking, but also modeled for them the interpretive techniques she had been teaching at the museum she had just come from. Her strategy was so very simple—just four questions in its entirety:

- “What does it remind you of? What does it make you think or feel?”
- “What about the work makes you think or feel that way?”
- “What more would you like to know about this work?”
- “What are you thinking or feeling as you consider this work now that you know more?”

It seemed simple, but in execution, it was so very layered with rich stories. Her methodology was grounded in phenomenology, at least that's what she thought. But, in essence, I watched her as she walked the docents through a brief, but very complete art-informed narrative inquiry process. And, all she did was engage them in a conversation...or was it?

- She evoked memories related to the topic, and they shared their personal stories.
- She asked each of them to consider the context within which their story made sense. They, in turn, expounded upon pieces of their personal narratives that explained the context in which their stories made sense and became valuable. Her responses to their stories validated each and inspired them to imagine more possible interpretations of the work.
- She provided them the opportunity to actively ask her to share different stories related to the work of art. They provided her with opportunities to tell them the museum's narrative, the artist's narrative, and many other versions of the narrative of that work of art. In the process, she helped them draw comparisons between the stories they had told her and the information she had provided for them.
- She asked them to re-assess their perspective now that they had experienced a convergence of two different stories. They took the opportunity to navigate a negotiation between the two and shared the new narrative they had re-storied.

It was the first time I had seen our docents so completely engrossed in an art-informed discussion, and feeling so competent in their abilities to interpret. She had mastered the art of helping people feel at ease in an unfamiliar interpretive world and drawn upon the innate meaning making strategies that are innate in most humans (Hooper-Greenhill, 2000a; Silverman, 1983). There was no worry or fear or concern that they didn't know enough about the work of art to discuss it. It was as if this interpretive act was no different from the kinds of conversations in which they tell stories to their friends every day. They were no longer passive observers listening to us interpret art for them; now each one was truly "an active participant in the quest for knowing" (Chambers, 2003, p. 155).

I did not see the docents demonstrate the technique they've been taught in a visitor guided tour. But, considering the simplicity of the methodology, and the way in which it seem to empower them, I don't think it'll take long for them to master the art of this kind of visual narrative inquiry, because it really is based on thought processes everyone is born knowing how to do: storytelling, remembering, and imagining.

Temporary Conclusion

Dear Reader,

I've shared a lot of stories with you which constitute my memories of some events that happened along my journey of narrative discovery. In the process, I've tried to capture pieces of my experiences that would help you understand my perspective on narrative as it relates to museum education. Intertwined with each memory are the bits and pieces of other stories I'd heard; the philosophies and educational theories of others. Hopefully, you were able to understand how I compared the information I was finding with my own thoughts and experiences and discarded some things, but appropriated others. Thankfully, I am almost finished with this revision as I try to re-story my perspective on the world and piece it all back together into one narrative text.

So, what's the resolution to the conflict in this story? How did I learn to reconcile the cultural need for narrative with my art museum education practices? Well, there really isn't a complete resolution quite yet. The last story I shared with you occurred just three weeks ago, and I'm still waiting to see how the story plays out. I still have not had the opportunity to observe docents implementing the tour techniques our art curator taught them, and I have not been able to observe any visitor reactions. My new mentor reports that she had great success engaging docents and visitors alike with her meaning making strategy at her former institution. But, it will be at least a few months before we can initiate an effort to try teaching a new training seminar on art interpretation in which we could begin testing the process in my museum setting.

I do know that if we are going to make this and other narrative inquiry successful, we will have to instigate a paradigm shift, altering our institution's perspective on art education philosophy. Before our visitors can begin exploring art as inquiry, we have to start viewing art,

not as an object but as a tool to assist learning processes. We have to view art *as* inquiry. I am hoping that we can learn to view art from the kind of mindset described by Arthur P. Bochner and Carolyn Ellis (2003):

As spectators, most of us are trained to look at art and ask, what do I see? But as a form of language, art can become reflexive, turn on itself, invite us to question our own premises, to ask, how do I see? What can I know? How do I know what I know? Then, art becomes a process and a form of inquiry...art can be viewed as an object or a product, but it also is an idea, a process, a way of knowing, a manner of speaking, an encounter with others; art can reveal an artist's perceptions and feelings, but it also can be used to recognize one's own....The kind of stories we embrace moves away from the world of brute facts toward the realm of human meanings....Imagine how we can think about and use art differently....art can be used not only as a mode of representation, but as a mode of inquiry...an awareness of one's self, one's life, one's meanings. (p. 506-509).

If we are going to foster the ability in our visitors to practice visual art narrative modes of meaning making, we will have to learn to view art, interpret art, represent art, and model art as inquiry for others. Defining art as inquiry will entail that we adopt the belief that art is a tool of interpretation (Bochner & Ellis, 2003). We will have to understand that viewing art as a tool of inquiry does not degrade art in any way, but rather elevates it from the status of being a mere object to that of being an education muse tightly intertwined in the life affecting lessons learned from transformative aesthetic experiences. And, we will have to adopt the following beliefs about art as inquiry outlined by Bochner and Ellis (2003):

1. Ideas are as important as forms
2. The viewer's perceptions, memories, and stories are as important as the artist's intentions

3. The language and motions of art is as important as its aesthetic qualities
4. Art is not something to be received but something to be used. To what use could art be put?
5. Art is not a conclusion but a turn in conversation
6. Art is not a closed statement but an open question
7. Art is not a way of declaring “this is how it is” but a means of inviting others to consider what it (or they) could become. (p. 506-510)

I believe that if the members of our staff will begin viewing art as inquiry, this new art museum narrative inquiry practice for docent-guided tours will be a very effective one. Because the tour walks visitors through a series of simple questions, the facilitation of the tour itself will suggest to visitors that “this is a place of ‘process’ learning, not ‘product learning’ (Falk & Dierking, 2000, p. 107). Having the sense that they have entered an incomplete, inquiry based environment will help visitors feel comfortable suspending disbelief long enough to become engaged in an inquiry into the narratives contained in museum art and exhibitions. Because it relies on the narrative foundations, of memory, storytelling, and imagination, I believe that visitors will feel enter this new interpretive space already feeling like they know how to use these interpretive strategies because they do it on a daily basis.

What I don’t know is what kind of long-term impact this shift to art as inquiry might have on our visitors. Will a focus on teaching this process help them learn how to make the narrative leap independently and autonomously after the tour is over and they are wandering the galleries on their own? Will they become actively engaged in dialogue with the art and all the possibilities to that exist for it to become relevant in their lives? Real visual narrative inquiry is not just a simple guided process that can be given as a gift to a passive observer. As Hedy Bach

(2007) so eloquently stated, “Visual narrative inquiry is an *intentional, reflective, active* human process in which researchers and participants explore and make meaning of experience both visually and narratively” (p. 281). Will visitors remember the process modeled for them and willingly and intentionally engage with the art on their own?

Sometime during the last year, as I have been trying to finish piecing together this narrative research project, my responsibilities at the museum were changed. Instead of working with the docent force, tours, and public programming, I have been assigned as an exhibit interpretive planner. It’s not the kind of position you usually find yourself in as an art museum educator. Art educators don’t usually find themselves planning hands-on interactive and immersive environments that supplement their exhibit spaces. The more experience I gain in exhibition planning, the more I am beginning to understand why some museum educators feel as if museums are more engaged in telling a story to others through narrative displays than they are in narrative based education (Hooper-Greenhill, 2000a). I feel like this role change has turned my understanding of narrative’s role in the art museum up-side down.

I find myself recognizing a disconnect between my advocacy for narrative based education and the exhibits I help create. I’ve begun to ask myself, “How often do my exhibit interpretive elements invite visitors to engage in their own visual art narrative inquiry process? How many of my interactive actually teach visitors narrative inquiry skills” (Chambers, 2003)? I am becoming increasingly aware that the visitor narrative is not yet an integral part of the exhibits we create; and simultaneously becoming more convinced that it should be (Duensing, 2003). And so, I have begun to ask myself a lot of questions about how I can make the art exhibition experience a true narrative inquiry endeavor.

As is so common with narrative inquiry research, I conclude this study with no conclusive answers, only a twist in plot a lot more questions to ask. Most of these questions stem from an idea that began to plague me early on in my inquiry process:

What about those who approach art from other interpretive backgrounds and realms of experience? How do we inspire them to navigate the space between the know and the unknown and begin to negotiate the meanings that can be discovered in the space between their entrance narrative and the narrative of an art museum?

I am now struggling with a lot of big questions like:

- How do we make the exhibit story compelling enough that visitors want to suspend their disbelief?
- How can we layer exhibits with enough different narratives, voices, and interpretations into an exhibit for visitors to engage in inquiry without docent assistance and without overwhelming visitors with too much content?
- How can we create free-choice exhibit elements that walk visitors through art-informed narrative inquiry strategies?
- How can we elicit memories from visitors when they are in a gallery alone?
- How can we encourage the imaginative exploration of ideas and encourage comparisons between various viewpoints without ever speaking to the visitor?
- How can we model the process of re-storying narratives for visitors who never have contact with a docent?
- How do we account for the extended time period required for visual art narrative inquiry to be fully explored?

Most importantly, I am asking the question:

How do we create an exhibit that constitutes a three-dimensional narrative learning environment seamlessly integrating the personal element, socio-cultural interactions, a sense of time and place, and continuity over time?

Today I am experiencing feelings similar to those I expressed as I was trying to piece together my thesis research methodology. I never felt quite like I had reached the ideal process of narrative inquiry; at least not until I found my way back to the Redbook Project and landed upon an art-based, art-informed, and very participatory methodology. It was the combination of those three components that for me really made it a personalized, transformative, life-altering experience. It was those three key learning strategies that allowed art to captivate the hearts and minds of my apathetic high school students.

I am just beginning to understand that somehow these strategies—art-based, art-informed, and participatory--are key to creating an exhibit experience through which visitors can learn to live the art-informed narrative inquiry experience on their own. And yet, at this point in my research, I still feel like I haven't yet made the complete museum narrative leap.

While the docent-guided tour strategy I learned from my colleague can help initiate a good art-informed narrative inquiry process that visitors can participate in, it is still devoid of an art-based narrative learning component. I have many questions left to answer regarding how essential that art-based learning process might be in creating a complete narrative inquiry art museum experience for visitors. I still wonder: and if it can be effectively integrated into a free-choice learning environment.

- How can I translate the complete Redbook experience into a participatory art exhibit?
- How essential is it for the art-based narrative inquiry experience to be integrated into art-informed narrative strategies fostered by exhibit elements?

- If art-based narrative inquiry is an important part of the learning process, how can we effectively integrate exhibit elements that foster these strategies into free-choice learning exhibition spaces?

On this journey to understanding narrative inquiry and the art museum, I've have come a long way, but the story isn't complete yet. I'm sure it never quite will be. Today I am writing a temporary conclusion to this narrative inquiry experience. Tomorrow I will begin collecting my next chapter of stories on the narrative inquiry exhibit. Stay tuned, and we'll see how the story continues to unfold.

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