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Book Review: Beyond Text: Learning Through Arts-Based Research

James Layton – University of the West of Scotland

Jeff Adams and Allan Owens (eds). *Beyond Text: Learning Through Arts-Based Research*. Bristol and Chicago: Intellect, 2021, pp. vii-269. £85/ \$113.50 Cloth.

Beyond Text is a collection of thirteen case studies exploring a range of applications for Arts-Based Research (ABR) and Arts-Based Educational Research (ABER). The case studies are based on several years' work with the Beyond Text Partnership (2016-2019), working across Estonia, Finland, Occupied Palestinian Territories, Spain, and the UK. Defining ABR as “a process of investigation leading to new shared knowledge in which the arts play a primary role in any or all steps of the process” (7), the book is divided into four sections: experimenting with ABR practices in academia, arts explored through ABR practices, ABR adopted in professional fields, and social action through ABR. ABR, which is “seen as a means of better understanding and re-thinking important social, organizational and societal issues” (7) is central to the work discussed in each chapter and illustrates the effectiveness of using the arts as intervention.

Beyond Text is organized in a way that helpfully allows readers to examine a single chapter that may be relevant to their interests or, for a broader perspective on ABR, read the volume from cover to cover. It will be of interest and value to anyone seeking to broaden their use of research methodologies, as well as to educators in all aspects of the arts. As well as Adams and Owens demonstrating their expertise in ABR, particularly in the visual arts and drama respectively, it is exciting to see contributions from emerging scholars and practitioners working in the arts.

ABR has historically been used in a variety of settings and institutions, but these case studies demonstrate that regardless of context, innovation and change are possible through utilizing the arts. Process drama, music, zines, and poetry are ways of exploring as diverse a range of issues as eco-anxiety, health care services, and the research methods taught as part of a doctoral program. As the editors argue in their introduction, “ABR practices are generally eschewed in favour of social science-based qualitative and quantitative methodologies” as a means of achieving measurable impact (7). What the case studies in this book demonstrate is that there is a powerful and persuasive argument for employing ABR, adding to the legitimization of this field of practice. The case studies also utilize creativity in conveying their findings. For example, in evaluating their research using the conflicting “inner voices” of rebellious,

realistic, and reflective thoughts, Ulrika von Schantz and Eva Österlind effectively demonstrate the merits of ABR. Their conclusion that ABR “emphasizes the process, [that] it’s a relational, ongoing, explorative movement among human experiences [...] [placing] emphasis on *dissensus* rather than consensus” (35) is a powerful statement that will resonate with anyone using the arts as a means of exploring lived experience of the world.

In “Accelerating movement across the intentional arc: Developing the strategic sensographer,” Mary Ann Kernan, Clive Holtham, and Sara Jones discuss their use of several creative strategies in developing pedagogical approaches to management and leadership education. Drawing on Brecht’s notion of alienation, the authors explain how aesthetic distancing can become a means of interpreting intuition and, in using the Situationist International strategy of the derive, reflection is also facilitated. In “*The Secret of Dayta: Learning and evaluating through process drama*” Elisabet Aznar, Elisa Ballardin and David Martínez evaluate the use of process drama in delivering a project promoting healthy habits and food consumption. One challenge presented to the researchers was a resistance to participation in process drama, which is ludic and requires a genuine presence from all participants. This resistance by some to ABR remains a challenge, although this excellent book goes some way towards changing the landscape.

One striking feature of all the case studies is that they reflect research carried out pre-COVID-19, when in-person, close interaction was always possible. As an epilogue to this book, it would be interesting to hear authors’ views on the challenges presented following COVID-19 and whether these have impacted ongoing practice.

This book would be an excellent resource for graduate students on courses which utilize participatory arts as methods, as well as being of interest to undergraduate students stepping into ABR for the first time. The range of applications for ABR here demonstrates its relevance to several disciplines, making it of great use to researchers in subjects where the active agency of participants is perhaps less foregrounded.