

Arts-Based Research: Why Push the Boundaries of Creativity in Research ?

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Arts-Based Research: Why Push the Boundaries of Creativity in Research?

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Abstract

New thinking about arts-based research (ABR) and how it functions to achieve its ambitions is needed. ABR needs to be extended from arts-based expression and enquiry to arts-based analysis to produce reliable data as a result of best practices. However, how arts-based methods (ABMs) work in research processes and how they are applied as working principles in all research phases have not been widely discussed. This article seeks to take a step back to the basic patterns of human thinking to understand why ABMs can be effective in volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous (VUCA) research fields with many existing unknowns. The ABMs of creating cultural probes and the analytical method of collaborative visual analysis (CVA) for creating more plural and collaborative analytical processes will be explored. In the humanities and social sciences fields, the transferability of these methods can benefit qualitative and mixed research approaches.

Keywords: Creativity, Arts-based Research, Art thinking, Arts-based methods, Decolonising.

1. Introduction

ABR, set in a qualitative research tradition, is an approach that integrates various artistic methods into the research process, fostering creativity, inclusivity, and new perspectives (Leavy, 2017; 2018). It departs from using traditional forms of data like numbers or text by including alternative expressions from participants, thereby giving them an authentic voice and visibility in the research process (Miettinen et al., 2019; Sarantou & Tessmer, 2021). It involves using different art forms—visual, performative, and multimedia—as inquiry, analysis, and expression tools. One of the critical strengths of ABR lies in its ability to challenge dominant narratives, amplify marginalised voices, and foster pluralism. It emphasises inclusivity, empathy, and self-reflection, disrupting traditional hierarchies and promoting participatory engagement throughout the research process (Seppälä et al., 2021). Additionally, ABR opens possibilities for more open-ended, divergent, and exploratory approaches in research, particularly in volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (VUCA) environments (Robbins, 2018). Moreover, ABR holds promise in decolonising knowledge production by acknowledging and valuing diverse perspectives, challenging power dynamics, and contributing to more egalitarian relationships in research (Seppälä et al., 2021).

Engagement with arts-based methods, exploration of ABR, and consideration of artistic research all signify a pursuit of research methodologies that leverage creativity, alternative perspectives, and unconventional approaches to generate a

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plurality of insights and knowledge. ABR is a research methodology that incorporates artistic practices into the research process (Leavy, 2017). It involves using different artistic mediums—visual arts, performative arts, multimedia, and creative writing—as tools for problem definition, data collection, analysis, and expression within a research context (Leavy, 2018). ABR is classified as a creative research approach involving innovative, unconventional, or artistic methods within the research process (Kara, 2015). It seeks to explore topics or questions using imaginative, non-traditional approaches, often integrating various forms of art, performance, or creative expression as tools for investigation and analysis (Figure 1 and 2). ABR involves using artistic processes, practices, or methods as a means of inquiry and exploration to produce knowledge or insights in various fields of research, whether in education (Chappell & Cahnmann-Taylor, 2013), healthcare and wellbeing (Sarantou & Tessmer, 2021), business (Sandberg, 2021) to name a few. ABR focuses on creative expression as a method of investigation in research. Interpretive methods, such as visual analysis for analysing data forthcoming from the use of ABMs, have sadly been neglected by social scientists (Machin & Ledin, 2018; Schnettler & Raab, 2009).



Figure 1 and 2. Aboriginal artists from Arts Ceduna in South Australia use felt techniques and merino wool as part of an ABR research strategy to explore the role of trust, the boundaries of storytelling and digital participation—photography by Amna Qureshi, 2023.

The emergence of concepts such as collaborative research, research partnership, co-creation and co-production of knowledge contributed to more creative and collaborative approaches in research. The participatory ‘turn’ became intertwined with arts-based research and community arts (Badham, 2013; Bishop, 2005; Wyatt et al., 2013). As a result, ABR gradually became embedded in participatory research (e.g., Kara, 2015; Leavy, 2018; Liangputtong & Rumbold, 2008). In addition, ABR is associated with aspects of plurality. McNiff (2008) signposted the plurality of art-based research as it can employ all visual and performing arts approaches. McNiff (2008, p.29) describes this approach as a systematic research process that is based on ‘the actual making of artistic expressions in all the different forms of the arts.’ Leavy (2018, p.5) further emphasised the plurality of ABR by proposing it as an umbrella category, or collective research method, that brings together at least 28 arts-based methods into a ‘partial lexicology of terms.’ ABR draws on abductive reasoning and exploring ways of being and becoming, dealing with the unknown, open possibilities, and how things ought to be (Dieleman, 2017). It supports improvisatory mindsets in research by supporting open possibilities and multidirectional exploration.

2. ABR’s contribution to decolonising research

While ABMs have the potential to contribute to decolonising Eurocentric knowledge production, it is essential to recognise that this process requires deliberate effort, and ABMs are not per se decolonising (Seppälä et al., 2021). It is not automatic and necessitates critical reflection, understanding of what needs to be decolonised, and ensuring tangible benefits for all involved. Empowerment of marginalised voices by recognising and valuing the expertise, knowledge, and agency of marginalised or colonised communities, ABMs contribute to empowering these groups (Seppälä et al., 2021). This helps rectify historical imbalances in knowledge dissemination and recognition (Seppälä et al., 2021).

The transformative potential of ABMs as catalysts for change in research paradigms (Gerber et al., 2018) emphasises the need for ongoing critical assessment and a conscientious approach to ensure their efficacy in promoting inclusivity and challenging dominant narratives and knowledge structures.

Through critical reflection and continuous evaluation when employing ABMs, it is essential to continually assess these methods' impact, ethics, and outcomes, ensuring they genuinely contribute to inclusivity, empowerment, and knowledge equity (Leavy, 2017). ABMs are potent tools for amplifying silenced knowledge and for bringing forth and elevating knowledge that might have been marginalised or disregarded due to dominant or colonial power structures (Seppälä et al., 2021; Miettinen et al., 2019). They provide a platform to highlight and give voice to historically side-lined perspectives. ABMs challenge the theory-practice dichotomy as they can blur the boundaries between theory and practice. They offer a more holistic approach that integrates experiential knowledge and academic theories, challenging the rigid separation between these domains.

3. Benefits and strengths of ABR

The benefits of ABR are that they are participatory and steered by a moral commitment to participants. Based on principles/practices of openness, respect, dialogue, reflection, and collective problem-solving, they support the perspectives and expressions of communities in their place-based and cultural contexts and offer adaptability across the entire research process (Leavy, 2017). ABRs enable horizontal relationships by lowering hierarchies, fostering pluralism, and increasing multivocality (Seppälä et al., 2021). The following summary of key attributes amplifies their strengths:

- Understanding and meaning-making processes: ABR is adept at navigating and comprehending complex meaning-making processes (Leavy, 2017). This is crucial, especially in qualitative research, where understanding participants' subjective experiences and interpretations is central.
- Cultivating connection, empathy, and self-reflection: ABR creates a platform for connection and empathy through storytelling and visualising. It disrupts dominant narratives by encouraging diverse perspectives, fostering empathy towards various viewpoints, and prompting self-reflection among researchers and participants alike (Chappell & Cahnmann-Taylor, 2013).
- Application throughout the research process: ABR is not limited to a specific research phase; it is versatile enough to be applied at every stage of a research cycle. From the

initial incubation phase, where ideas take root through problem identification, method selection, data collection, analysis, and the eventual interpretation of results, ABR's creative tools can aid in idea generation and exploration (Leavy, 2017).

- Assisting in idea percolation: This method helps researchers with idea percolation, enabling intuitive, free flow and development of ideas. Using diverse artistic approaches, ABR facilitates exploring and expanding concepts, allowing for more innovative and nuanced research ideas (Leavy, 2017).

4. Creativity in research design

Creative thinking is strongly associated with problem-solving behaviour (Newell et al., 1962; Guilford, 1967; Webster, 1990; Runco, 2020), yet it is a valuable soft skill that will remain in demand into the future (Dean, 2017). Patrick (1955) explained creative thought as an iterative process of preparation, incubation, illumination, and revision. The creativity process can be partly adopted into the ABR research cycle described by Leavy (2018) as problem definition (preparation), determining the methods and data collection (incubation), analysis and expression or reporting and documenting the findings (illumination and revision).

ABR presents a promising research avenue combining artistic creativity, inclusivity, and critical inquiry to produce multifaceted, nuanced, and socially impactful outcomes. The activities researchers engage in—exploring ABR, delving into various artistic methods, and seeking innovative approaches to inquiry and analysis—embody creativity. Creativity involves generating novel ideas, approaches, or solutions, and research endeavours can certainly align with these notions. However, creativity is context-specific in research, depending on the participants' and researchers' knowledge, skills and abilities.

In art thinking, creativity, imagination, an open-minded perspective, and collective sensemaking (Robbins & Sandberg, 2023) are key elements used to approach problems in unconventional ways (Sandberg, 2021). Ogawa (2016, n.p.) defines art thinking as a process of applying artistic thinking and an artful view to a broader range of challenges. The role of art

thinking in creative and arts-based research is to liberate practitioners from user-centric approaches that underpin design thinking in research. Art thinking can offer more open-ended, radical, and disruptive possibilities in exploratory processes (Robbins, 2018). Art thinking is at the core of ABR, as it follows the logic of divergent approaches to embodied artistic processes.

By incorporating elements from the arts, such as drawing, storytelling, design thinking, and improvisation, researchers can tackle complex problems with a fresh and imaginative outlook. In research phases such as exploration, analysis and dissemination, art thinking can assist arts-based researchers in each phase to delve deeper, gathering profound insights into the research phenomenon (Figure 3). However, artistic thinking remains elusive (Yamaguchi, 2017). Nevertheless, it embraces ambiguity and explores diverse viewpoints to generate innovative outcomes, including diverse data forms, such as vibrant and rich visual data that need new interpretative and analytical approaches.

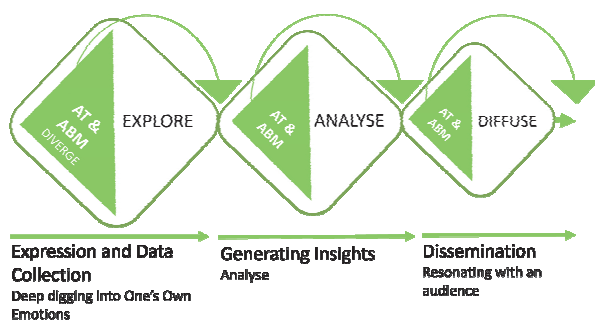


Figure 3. The ABR process integrates art thinking as a divergent approach into the three research phases: Explore, Analyse and Diffuse.

5. Arts-based methods

ABMs encompass various creative techniques and practices employed in research. These methods utilise artistic forms—visual arts, creative writing, storytelling, drama, and multimedia—to collect, interpret, and present data, often allowing for more nuanced and multi-dimensional insights. ABMs encompass various creative practices: visual arts, audio-visual arts, performative arts, creative writing, storytelling, and all multimethod forms, combining various art forms (Leavy, 2018). These methods aid in data collection, often

capturing textual and visual data through interviews, observations, creative writing tools, drama techniques, and even devised theatre.

Data collection in art-based research aims to capture notational/textual and visual data. It uses methods such as interviews, storytelling, and observations. Methods for documenting notational, text and visual data include script co-writing, video and self-documentation, photography, map making and cartography, illustrations, field sketches, note taking and research diaries. Examples of such methods include aesthetic mapping (Letsiou, 2017), creative writing tools (Cameron, 1999), serious play (Schrage, 1999), devised theatre (Perry, 2011), life span mapping (Webster et al., 2010), and life story mandala (Miettinen et al., 2016; Sarantou & Miettinen, 2019).

One approach to using ABMs in research is to produce and prepare cultural probing, which involves using stimulating tools and materials that may offer experimental research design and strategies tailored to a research context (Gaver et al., 1999). This approach enables experimental research design and exploration within a given environment by offering specific outcomes relevant to the research. The strength of the cultural probing method is that the forthcoming outcomes are specific to the purpose, people, and environment of a research context (Gaver et al., 1999, p. 29). Hemmings et al. (2002) introduced probing kits, which may consist of tools for making and documenting the testing and examination of social or cultural phenomena, such as digital devices, all forms of art or DIY materials.

6. An interpretive approach to analyse data forthcoming from ABR

The collaborative visual analysis (CVA) method can facilitate interpreting data obtained through ABR (Sarantou & Miettinen, 2022). This method emphasises examining elements such as colour, shape, relationships, and meaning (Machin & Ledin, 2018). It is a structured yet open-ended process that involves reflection, interpretation, and discussion. Due to its focus on collaboration and reflexion, the interpretations forthcoming from CVA are more robust and collaboratively constructed. Due to the variety of input, personal biases are ameliorated (Sarantou et al., 2019). The CVA method employs

a systematic approach to interpreting visual material, which includes the following steps (Bal, 1977; Bronzwaer, 1981; Machin & Ledin, 2018; Schnettler & Raab, 2009):

- Observation by establishing what you see through ‘thick interpretive description’ (Schnettler & Raab, 2009, p. 281): This step involves describing the visual content objectively. It includes noting details about the image’s colours, shapes, lines, scale, and other visual elements.
- Examining relationships: Analysing the relationships within the visual content involves interpreting the connections between elements. This includes exploring lines of sight, body language, facial expressions, and how these elements interact within the visual.
- Interpreting meaning: Moving beyond the surface, this step involves trying to understand the deeper meaning conveyed by the visual content. What does it communicate about a particular subject, concept, or context?
- Debate and discussion: This phase engages in discussions and debates about the value and significance of the visual text. It encourages critical thinking and diverse viewpoints regarding the interpretation.
- Comparing and contrasting themes: This step involves placing the visual content in the context of current social and cultural paradigms. Comparing themes or elements in the image to prevalent societal beliefs or cultural norms helps understand the potential messages conveyed.
- Identifying dominant themes and personal responses: Recognising dominant themes within the visual text and acknowledging personal reactions or responses to them contributes to a deeper understanding of the content.
- Establishing links to people, time, and space: This involves contextualising the visual content within broader perspectives—understanding its relevance, its relationship to human experiences, its connection to a specific time or era, and its portrayal of space or place.
- Contextual validity: Ensuring the validity of interpretations involves considering the context in which the visual content is presented. This step assesses the credibility and reliability of the interpretations made.

By following these systematic steps, the CVA method enables researchers to delve deeply into the nuances of visual material,

facilitating a comprehensive and multidimensional understanding of the content and its implications within various contexts.

7. Conclusion

By embracing ABR, researchers can foster inclusivity, tap into diverse perspectives, and create research that adheres to traditional academic standards and resonates on an emotional and human level, allowing for deeper understanding and connection with the subject matter. ABR is based on creativity and underpinned by art thinking, enabling open, explorative and divergent research processes. Art thinking helps in opening up and knowing differently about a research phenomenon. Researchers can draw from the multiplicity of ABMs to explore research phenomena, while participants can express their understanding of a given phenomenon in multiple forms, thus enabling reflexivity and engagement. However, research needs to prioritise interpretive and analytical approaches to harness the potential of ABR.

The transformative potential of ABMs as catalysts for transformative change in research paradigms emphasises the need for ongoing critical assessment and a conscientious approach to ensure their efficacy in promoting inclusivity and challenging dominant knowledge structures. ABMs offer a platform to highlight and give voice to historically side-lined perspectives and challenge the theory-practice dichotomy. They provide a more holistic approach that integrates experiential knowledge and academic theories, challenging the rigid separation between these domains. In addition, continuous critical reflection and a clear understanding of decolonising efforts are essential to maximise the potential benefits of ABR and ensure ethical practice. Some of ABR’s underpinning values are providing tangible benefits for participants, actively working towards inclusivity and empowerment, recognising marginalised voices, and providing opportunities for expression and reflection.

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