

Creating Outside the Box

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Abstract

This paper shares my journey from rigid, self-doubting, and strict to fluid, confident, freedom of thinking as I created, moved, thought, and philosophized my way through an arts-based and community-based research course. In that course, I created a photography piece, “Bluff City Merger.” Through the creation of this project my view of who I was as a researcher and as a person began to shift and an unmasking began to take place by the end of this project. Bluff City Merger created a space that would allow for the individual to construct their own meaning and understanding of all that took place in Memphis, Tennessee (US). The purpose of this piece was to spark conversation and conceptualization surrounding the bussing controversy of the early 70’s in the city of Memphis while also contemplating the current state of the school system by merging photographs from the past with those from the present.

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The Beginning

In the beginning, after reading the course description for this unique class about intersectionality in arts-based and community-based research, I was relieved to take it. I was in the third semester of my doctoral degree program and at that point I had taken many of the qualitative research courses that had been offered. There was a certain level of uncertainty and excitement that I felt on the first day of class. I was excited to take a course that focused on both arts-based research and community involvement. However, I was uncertain of what to expect out of engaging with this course. My graduate school experiences before this course were influenced by a very rigorous way of conducting qualitative research. The majority of the courses I had taken before had certain outcomes that one could expect to experience by the end of the semester. Every course had a structure and there were rule/standards one must live up to in order to gain the grade that one wanted. What made this course so different was that there was an idea of what could happen but there was not a clear definition of what those outcomes could and would end up becoming. In this paper, I share my experiences in the class and how those experiences changed me as a researcher.

The first day of class was the starting point for my self-discovery journey as a researcher. With great anticipation, I knew that the class was going to be an experience like none other. This was the first time I was able to take a course with a mixed group of people across many different disciplines. Our class was

a very diverse group of individuals and it was refreshing to see so many new faces in one place. One of my fondest experiences about this course was when our professors told us to go take a walk. It was something very simple yet for the individuals in the room it became a very alarming moment. Many of us were used to the traditional structure of a course where rules or standards are given and in order to receive the desired grade one must follow those rules. Our professors told us to simply take a thirty-minute walk and then write about that experience. There were no stipulations on where to walk or what to look for and immediately I felt the urge to try and formulate my own guidelines. Because of my experiences with the traditional class structure, when given the freedom to simply take a walk, I tried to create my own guidelines. However, I soon let go of that desire to have guidelines the moment I began walking in a direction that I normally drove down when coming to campus. I began to simply notice the world around me and truly be in the moment. The act of walking slowed down my view of the spaces that I normally rushed through on a typical day. The act of walking over dead leaves on the ground and noticing a memorial sign against the backdrop of the changing sky inspired me to begin to contemplate the concept of time. I also noticed how the natural world coincided with the world we have constructed through buildings. After the walk I wrote a passage that did not sound like my typical writing. I simply began to make meaning of my experience on this walk and write with a passion that was not restricted by word counts or page numbers. I created a piece that was different and even after constructing this piece I was still very nervous about what I had created. I did not want to speak about what I wrote because it was so different and I was still thinking on the binary of right/wrong writing. However, once I read it aloud, I experienced a new sense of freedom. This is what I wrote:

Time,

Something so precious yet wasteful. It comes and goes like cars driving up and down the street or like a train coming and going. It can be peaceful like the soft sweet hums of crickets or glaring like multiple cars on one side of the road. With time comes changes, life is given like new baby shrubs but death comes like the slow hanging of old tree limbs. Seasons pass with time, leaves change color signifying the passage of time. Time brings stark changes like the sky after the storm passes changes from blue to grey and back to blue. Time can bring sadness like a memorial constantly reminding you of a loss or it can bring anticipation like the way you feel waiting on a car to pass. Time is like fresh air uninterrupted until you step on or come up to mud. Time like two worlds coexisting like new concrete on old ground. Time is continuous and instinctive like how trees shrivel up and lose leaves but soon will come back to like. Time keeps on ticking.

For the first time ever, I produced a piece of work that captured a moment where I was allowed to think and be free. That was the spark that began to turn into the fire that fueled this journey that I am still traveling. That one moment of freedom to express my inner thoughts without the constraints normally given within the classroom became a catalyst of change that not only impacted the way I situated myself as a researcher but also how I began to view myself holistically.

The Process

After our first walk, we all embarked on a journey that could be represented by what Manning (2016) calls “Technicity”. According to Manning (2016) “technicity would be the experience of how the work opens itself to its potential, to its more-than” (p.40). As we began walking in our groups in our chosen neighborhoods our projects began to take shape through our experiences. At first, I had no idea what I would ultimately produce through this course but I was open to the possibility that anything could be created. We were in our third walk through our neighborhood when my awakening experience happened. On this particular day, my walking group and I were walking through a new area of our chosen neighborhood. Before this day we had walked in other areas and we were beginning to engage with our environment. The act of walking caused us to slow down and really explore these spaces that we would miss if we were driving. On this particular walk, after walking and noticing the differences between the new and older houses in our neighborhood, we stumbled upon this massive school in the middle of the neighborhood that had been there for over 100 years. As we walked around this school, I became very aware of its placement in the neighborhood and was curious as to how the school had functioned as a part of this space for such a long time. I began to think about different questions “Who attends this school now?”, “Who attended the school when it first opened?”, “What were the students’ experiences here during the era of segregation and integration?”

This moment of noticing this structure and sparking that thought process, led to my project “Bluff City Merger”. After jotting down a few notes about the structure I then embarked on the research process of discovering the answers to my questions. I began my information search employing my usual way of research of using the internet. I utilized different search engines and pored over neighborhood association websites searching for any information about this massive school. My initial searches were not fruitful which cause me to have to change my usual research methods. I then reached out to the school secretary hoping I could set up a meeting with the librarian to discuss the school history. Like the internet searches, that attempt was not fruitful. My next step of this journey led me on a trip to the local library that had a room dedicated to different neighborhoods within the Memphis (or what is sometimes called Bluff City due to its location on the bluffs of the Mississippi River) area. On one late afternoon, I spent over three hours poring over newspaper archives searching for any information about this school. After an hour of looking, I experienced a moment of disappointment. Due to my more traditional view of the research process and recognizing that the information I was hoping to find was not available, I almost gave up on my project. At the moment in which I almost allowed my self-doubting thoughts to consume me, I stumbled upon an article on integration within the city. This article appeared interesting because I was under the assumption that the city integrated during the same time frame as other cities did, but my assumption was very wrong. This article opened up a new journey into a fascinating story about the school system during that time and even started the thinking process about the state of the school system now. This journey on that day led to the idea of my final project. I wanted to give this story a voice, spark conversations between others, and allow them to think through the information just as I did while sitting in that study room.

My project “Bluff City Merger” was a photography piece whose purpose was to spark conversation and conceptualization surrounding the bussing controversy of the early 70’s in the city of Memphis while also contemplating the current state of the school system. To represent my thought process and to create a space where others could engage in this thought process I decided to create this photography project in which I merged pictures from the past with those from the present. Along with those pictures I created an information sheet with information about the city of Memphis during the bussing controversy, information about the elementary school that we stumbled upon and current information about the neighborhood and the school system. The idea was for the reader to look at the photos and then read the information sheet and allow the photos and the information to help them think though the current state of the school system. I wanted to create a space that would allow for the individual to construct their own meaning and understanding of all that took place with this great city. Below you will see pictures of my pieces and the information sheet:

This piece is a merger of two pictures of the school, one taken in 2017 and the other in the 1900s.



Below is the information table that I created to go along with the photos. It was very simple and created to give just small pieces of information so that readers could engage in conversations with others about what they read and what they were thinking.

<p>In 1989 Peabody became an optional school with an international focus and now students learn Russian at least 3 times a week.</p>	<p>79.6% of students are African American and these students live primarily in the Rozelle-Annesdale neighborhood.</p>
<p>In 1982, in a move to preserve the school, Peabody was put on the National register of historical places.</p>	<p>In 1970, there were about 148,015 students in the Memphis city schools. In 1972, U.S. district judge Robert McRae ordered Plan A, which would bus 13,789 students to new schools. 8,000 White students left the city system. When that fell through he ordered Plan Z which would bus 39,904 students to new schools...20,525 White students left the school system.</p>
<p>Peabody Elementary opened in 1910 and was Whites only.</p>	<p>Memphis schools were officially desegregated during the 1972-1973 school year. Almost 20 years after the <i>Brown vs. Board of Education decision</i>.</p>
<p>In the late 60s, the NAACP organized “Black Monday” protests to protest the Memphis city school boards’ delay in desegregating the schools. During that time the school received funds for how many students attended school each day. They organized the protests by encouraging Black students, teachers and administrators to boycott school once a day per week.</p>	<p>In the early 70s the Citizens Against Busing (CAB) also had their own protest, they organized “A day of Mourning” with a 97 car-funeral procession for neighborhood schools as a result of the proposed busing of White students to majority Black schools.</p>

When I presented this information to the public at the art exhibit, I was pleasantly surprised by the responses that I received. Being able to watch others engage with this piece gave me a sense of satisfaction that I did not expect to feel by the end of this process. This process did not begin how I thought it would but that was the beauty of it all. It became more than what I could have imagined and just like Manning (2016) wrote “technicity is ineffable- it can be felt, but it is difficult to articulate in language” (p. 40). I find it difficult at times to explain the experience of how this project began, was undone, and then began again. Similar to my perception of myself as a rigid researcher, this project, started off following the same traditional path of research like every other project I conducted in my past. It was through the art of walking the neighborhood, stepping out of my traditional viewpoint of research methods, and ultimately allowing the project to speak for itself that this entire experience came alive. It can be difficult to explain the experience that I felt of being so rigid then becoming fluid and the freedom I felt once everything was complete. It is an experience that was lived and has now shaped the way I view myself as a researcher.

Unmasking the Researcher

The experience of employing walking methodologies and engaging with this course has provided me the space to think beyond the binary of right/wrong when it comes to research and life. I was challenged to be attentive and aware of who I was and what I was doing in every moment of this journey. This process created a space to think beyond my usual way of thinking and look at the world from the viewpoint of “it is” versus “what is”. I began to allow the work to be what it is, whatever was produced was what was produced and for the first time I was ok with allowing that to happen. Through this process I had to let go of my traditional view of the research process of always finding the right answer or always following the set rules. I had to examine and ultimately release my rigid and self-doubting views of the work that I was producing. I began to genuinely trust my professors and trust the journey that they were taking us down. This process created a space for me to think beyond the surface and that was freedom for me. My whole perspective of life has shifted because of these experiences. I now look at my experiences as moments of meaning, allowing them to flow into whatever they need to be. There is freedom in being in the moment and allowing things to simply BE.

Before I engaged with this class I lived a very structured life both inside and outside of the classroom. Outside of the classroom, I was the type of person, who always had a plan and would experience anxiety if that plan was not completed exactly how it was formulated. This structured way of thinking also influenced my life inside of the classroom. Inside of the classroom, I was the type of student, who always tried to follow every standard or rule that was set in place. However, this course allowed me to engage with my fellow classmates, the material, and with myself in a space that challenged us to break free from the traditional modes of “classroom” practices. When we walked the different neighborhoods in the city, I was challenged to think about myself in different spaces. Since starting my PhD program, I have always had this extra sense of awareness that many other black students have felt in predominantly white spaces. Although I have been fortunate to be a part of a program with professors and classmates who are allies, I am always aware of myself and how other perceive me in these spaces. Shavers and Moore (2014) proposed this “academic mask” that many black female students put on while navigating their doctoral programs. This “academic mask” is almost like a performance of what one perceives to be acceptable or professional in these spaces (Shavers and Moore, 2014). It is a heightened awareness of how one acts and what one says and how that is perceived by their classmates and professors. As a minority student, one wants to be acknowledged for their work while also not portraying the stereotypes that are commonly associated with their ethnic group. For me, this structured life that I was living was my version of an academic mask. When I started this program, I wanted to be viewed in a positive light by my counterparts and my professors. I wanted everyone to see and believe that not only did I belong in the space, I could also contribute quality work and meaningful insight to this program. Because of my heightened sense of awareness, I always felt like I had to always showcase a professional persona no matter what was going on in my personal life. Wearing this mask became a very tiring process because as Shavers and Moore (2014) mentioned the more one wears this academic mask the more one restricts and constrain their true self. When I would leave school and return home, I often felt so much pressure release from my body that I became physically exhausted.

The act of wearing this academic mask started to become an automatic process. This academic mask showed up whenever I needed to present a professional persona to the outside world. This academic mask became my protective mechanism for fear of my true self not being accepted by my counterparts. The mask provided me with a sense of comfort as I struggled with feelings of not belonging in certain spaces. As a small child, I never felt a sense of belonging to any type of group including my family. I am a first-generation doctoral student within my immediate and extended families. There has always been this tension when it comes to academics within my extended family. They are a very traditional southern family, and for them being a successful woman is tied to your duty to find a good husband and bear children. My academic success is a minor accomplishment and when I am around that side of my family I often engage in what Shavers and Moore (2014) suggest is the “other self”. This “other self” is an attempt to shed the academic mask as to not appear like an outsider among ones family and friends (Shavers and Moore, 2014). There have been many instances where I have either downplayed my accomplishments or not even mention them at all just so that I can feel as if I belonged within these spaces with the people who look like me. This shifting between the academic mask and the other self was a very tiring and mentally draining process that I had almost become immune to until I engaged with this course.

As stated before, this course challenged me to not only think outside of the box I had put myself in as a researcher but also remove the constraints that I had placed on myself holistically. Within this course we were challenged to think beyond the world of right/wrong. For a person who was accustomed to shifting her persona depending on her environment just to feel like she belonged somewhere, this disruption of the binaries was a freeing moment. I honestly did not realize how much I censured myself until I was given the opportunity to simply “be.” Walking methodology gave me the freedom to navigate a space with minimal constraints. Many days as we walked I would simply take in my surrounding and really think through what I was feeling in those moments. Those feelings and thoughts would range from feeling like an outsider in spaces that were gentrified to feelings of connection to the spaces whose outside appearance appeared to be run down. I was able to work through why I felt those feelings and what connections I was having with those different areas of the neighborhood. I was given an opportunity to trust what I was thinking and reassured that what I felt in that space was valid, not because of some outside standard but because I felt it at that moment. It was during these walks that I did not have on my “academic mask” or my “other self”, I was simply me processing and enjoying the world around me. I began to notice the structures of the neighborhoods and how there were literal visualizations of poverty and wealth separated by just a train track. I began to notice the accessibility of the streets and how easy it was for someone without any physical difference to navigate the world but if you were slightly taller or larger than average your navigation could be more strenuous. These walks provided me with a space of freedom that I did not even realize I needed.

After the walks and then the subsequent research project I began to let my academic mask fade away with each class meeting. I began to allow my true self to shine through without fear of what others would perceive of me. I began to feel as if I did truly belong in this program, not for my acts but because

I deserved to be here just like everyone else. This course was such a freeing journey that I now can see a difference in how I navigate my world both inside and outside of the classroom. I no longer fear spaces in which I am the only minority in the room, I have ventured out and allowed my work to speak for itself. I have allowed my classmates to see my true self outside of the papers and projects. I have allowed myself to be confident in my work regardless if others understand the purpose of it.

This disruption of the binaries, this creating outside of the box of life has given me a freedom that I did not know existed. As I reflect on this entire process, I recognize that my reliance of my academic masks was out of fear of failing. With every other course before this one I was able to use my mask as a safety net. If I performed well and followed the rules, then I would get the grade that I needed to advance to the next level of this process. I am forever grateful for this course because in many ways it disrupted my normal way of navigating a classroom space. I could not rely on my mask to get me through this course and to the grade that I wanted. This course required an authentic self that was unafraid of the possibilities that could occur over the course of a semester. You could not hide who you truly were as you walked these strange neighborhoods. You could not hide who you were as you read the material and then walked with the material and then engaged with others about the walks. There were instances in which I became very aware of my race while walking and when I spoke up about it in the class discussion other students voiced their awareness and there was this unspoken comradery that was forged between the shared awareness of what race represents in certain spaces. I would not have experienced the beauty of producing work without constraints if I had held on to my mask at the beginning of this process. There is beauty in disruption because disruption causes you to reflect on why you believed what you believed or, in my case, why I was so structured in my living and doing both inside and outside of the classroom. This course provided me with an inner sense of acceptance that I desperately wanted from others, but I discovered I already had it within myself.

References

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