

Exploring and sharing arts therapy experiences through fiction-based research

Deborah Green

Abstract

Fiction-based research (Leavy, 2013), blended with autoethnographic a/r/tography and arts therapy, has potential to provide arts-based ways to create useful arts therapy session descriptions in contexts where it is unethical to reference recognisable clients. This paper grounds this idea in theory alongside examples from my PhD research journey, during which I used expressive and reflexive processes, including creative writing, to pull apart and re-configure true-to-life moments, processes, successes and challenges I faced as quake-arts therapist. Having found this me-search approach illuminating, I offer other arts therapists insight into this emergent practice both as a way of coming-to-know and of sharing our work.

Keywords

Arts-based research, autoethnography, a/r/tography, fiction-based research, arts therapy.

Introduction

“We need to tell our stories more” writes a/r/tographic researcher Carl Leggo (2008), as “the stories we write and tell about our living experiences will teach us how to live with more creativity, confidence, flexibility, coherence, imagination, and truthfulness” (p.21). As arts therapists, however, our professional stories often intertwine with the life stories spoken, painted and sculpted, enacted and danced by our clients within the confidential containment of the therapeutic space – a dilemma that became figural when, in 2013, I began a PhD exploring my experiences as quake-arts therapist in Christchurch.¹ My earthquake-battered clients did not come to me as research subjects, yet their creative journeys are inextricable from my tale of coming-into-being as beginning arts therapist. During my arts-based inquiry, I thus found myself blurring fact and fiction within composite client stories in my attempts to honour the ethical boundaries of confidentiality while simultaneously plumbing these lived experiences to gain deeper

understanding of my therapeutic practice. This process proved personally illuminating and I believe other arts therapists may benefit from this emergent practice – both as a way of coming-to-know and of sharing our work.

Rather than present a ready made formula, this paper intends to open conversations about the potential value of fiction-based research (Leavy, 2013) to arts therapy and therapists. To this end, I begin with an example. I then ground my use of ‘factual fiction’ within my quake/research context and core ideas about arts-based research (ABR), autoethnography, a/r/tography, and fiction-based research, before teasing apart my use of arts therapeutic processes as research. Finally, I conclude with a piece of ‘factional’ writing to demonstrate how this process may produce provocative session vignettes.

Example 1: Finding heART

As my work deepened with those enmeshed in the distressing liminality evoked by the earthquakes and their enduring aftermath,

I returned time and again to what I call 'dropping-in to find out what our souls are doing'. This process expands Focusing-Orientated Art Therapy (FOAT) (Rappaport, 2008) through dialoguing with the images-as-angels (McNiff, 2004) to discover what soul is doing (Hillman, 1983).

Wanting to externalise this process into a creative description, I call upon my TeddyBear-Sage, one of the many internal figments-of-self created during my research. These 'animangels' are magical imagined animations that embody personal characteristics to help me open conversations with myself and my work.

I say to my Sage: Let's fictionalise the non-fictional by teasing out textures and flavours of the many times I've encouraged clients to drop-in on their souls, find images and bring them into tangible being through the arts, so that we may see, touch, smell, taste, hear and feel them fully before beginning whatever process of aesthetic transformation they call for. We'll locate our (re)creation of dropping-in within a process of working on troublesome feelings...

She enters the studio with false cheer, smiling too brightly, shoulders resolutely back, chin forward. But her arms end in hands that are tight and her eyes slide from mine. She sits, unconsciously moving her chair as far back against the wall as possible. She crosses her arms against her chest and then, realising what she's done, quickly uncrosses them but doesn't know what to do with her hands and so they land upon the art table, flutter down to her lap, clasp and unclasp, scratch, flap, settle and then rise again.

We're both aware of this strange jangle of movements. It's as if we have been joined in the studio by a pair of fretful five-tentacled aliens.

I wonder aloud if we should drop-in to what her hands are telling us. She tries to capture them, making them clutch onto each other, but they strain to part and continue their restless tango. They really seem to be wanting to have their say, I suggest. She sighs and places them purposefully onto the



Figure 1. Deborah Green, *My TeddyBear-Sage*, 2014, Paper clay, 50mm high.

table, fingers spread, and we both look at them closely.

Ok, she says.

I invite her to sit comfortably in her chair but also remind her that she's welcome to move as much as required to be with and stay with the sensations that may arise. I voice the idea that, as her hands are very talkative today, they may want to move and may even want her whole body to move with them. If this happens, she's welcome to follow this inner urge to dance and move about. Her hands perk up at this suggestion, making peaks on the table, but her eyes look out at me from a pinched face.

I ask if she would like music. She nods. Something soothing? Again the nod. I look at her hands. They seem to agree, as they are now turned palms-in, touching gently and rhythmically rubbing back and forth.

I fill the air with Vanessa Mae's lyrical violin.

I take a few deep breaths, my body inviting her to do the same. We slow down and once I feel we're both settled, I begin.

You're welcome to close your eyes or keep them open – whatever works best. If you keep them open, let them go fuzzy so you're looking inwards rather than outwards.

She gazes into the centre of the table, her hands drop to her lap and stay there for the time being.

Become aware of your body in this moment. Feel the weight of your thighs and back against the chair, your feet on the floor. You are here, in this solid body, in this moment.

Her eyes close and her breath deepens.

Shift your attention to your sense of taste. Become aware of what you taste in your mouth in this moment... Now let your awareness move to your sense of smell. Notice what you can smell in this moment... Let your attention drift to your sense of touch. How does your skin feel in this moment? Now become aware of what you can see behind your closed eyelids. Gaze at the shapes and colours... Slide your awareness to your hearing. Focus on what you can hear outside the room. Move your hearing inside the room. Now listen deeply to the sounds inside your body... your breathing... and even deeper, your heartbeat.

She is still, breathing slowly in and out as if asleep.

Follow your heartbeat down into yourself. Stay with your heartbeat for a while. Feel your solid rhythm, your life-force. When you're ready, ask your heartbeat to take you to the story your hands want to tell us.

Her hands flutter in response, but settle back into her lap. They know they are being honoured, their tale will be heard.

Allow yourself to be gently led to the place within that holds this story. Approach this place inside with curiosity. Be welcoming of this felt-sense and of the soul-sense it evokes. You are fascinated, not judging. Sit next to this internal space in friendship. Silently tell the feeling that you want to know it well, ask it to trust you and to reveal itself fully to you. If distressing images come, remember your heartbeat is there with you, calming and grounding you.

I see her frown briefly, her hands moving again, finding each other, holding tightly. She breathes into the sensation and I stay



Figure 2. Deborah Green, *Caring for myself*, 2014, Modelling clay, 100mm long.

with her, matching her breathing, honouring her journey with my silent whole-bodied support. Slowly her hands relax, still holding each other but more gently now. Her face grows smooth.

As you stay with this felt-sense, take note of any smells and tastes, sights and sounds and sensations connected to it. Now gently invite it to offer you a way to bring it into being using art. It may wish to be expressed through an image you can paint or draw or model in clay or wire. It may want you to write some words or make some sounds. It may want to be represented through a sandtray or a series of gestures or a dance. It may even come up with an idea we have never tried. Wait patiently while it lets you know how best to depict it.

When you have an image, or gestures, words, sounds, or something else, check-in with the original feelings and story to make sure it all fits, that the symbol you have resonates with and expresses the whole felt-sense.

She concentrates and then nods.

Turn back to your inner felt-sense and thank it. It's bravely opened to you and you're validating the way it's made itself vulnerable... Now, bringing the symbol with you, reconnect with your heartbeat. Follow it back towards to the sound of your breath. Follow your breath to the sounds in the room. Become aware of any tastes and smells in this moment, of the weight of your body and the touch of your clothes and the air on your skin. Notice the lights and colours and shapes behind your closed eyelids ... and when you're ready, open your eyes, breathe and stretch... and begin to create your symbol...

She opens her eyes slowly, unfolding her body as if emerging from a deep sleep. She blinks several times and when she seems ready, I ask, Art materials? Clay, she replies. I gather this, placing a board with a chunk of potters' modelling clay in front of each of us. As I quietly gather a jar of water, paper towels and clay tools, she's already creating, her hands now using their energy to shape the clay. To let me know the central theme of her journey she speaks a few words:

I feel powerless, my heart and hands useless and silenced...

I drop-in to her words, connecting them into my soul-sense of other stories she's told of herself and her life. The earthquakes have shaken free older hurts inflicted during a neglectful childhood and marriage to an abusive partner. I allow these wounds to find reverberations within my own soul and I sit with these feelings as I hold the space for her to create. I see her hands forming a heart and my own hands begin to twitch in empathy. I let them start mirroring her movements.

Side-by-side, in silent communion, we mould and press the soft clay with our knowing hands. Two women with different life-experiences but connected by the common thread of being human – embodied, alive, feeling-creatures.

Finally, she slows, her clay-caked hands sated and falling into stillness, lying heavy on either side of her creation.

She takes a deep breath. I match her and we join eyes and breathe out slowly, smiling slightly.

We look at her creation. Are there any words? I ask.

I found a huge wall of loneliness inside, she begins, and at first I couldn't do anything about it. It blocked out all the light. I just had to sit there. Usually when I feel like this, I run away, distract myself, but this time I just sat there. And as I sat there with this wall, it started to feel less threatening. I became aware that something was on the other side. The wall was letting me know that something was on the other side. I wanted to get to the other side. But still the wall felt too big. But then I realised I could move – so I got up and walked along the wall... and suddenly I could see around the edge! Behind the wall was my heart and it was very quiet. So I went to it. I wanted to make it beat again but it wasn't ready. So I just sat next to it, like you said to do, and kept it company.

I gave it lots of love and it felt so good.

And when I asked for a way to make this feeling into art, I saw my heart covered with plasters and bandages.

We look at our creations – two mended hearts, side-by-side.

What comes up for you now that you've created this beloved heart? And can you connect this to your very talkative hands? I ask.

I get the feeling that my hands were all about action and trying to do things and failing. I felt like this all the time when I was with him. I felt like I was powerless, a failure. I feel like this again now, waiting for insurance and EQC² to decide my fate – I'm being abused all over again and there's nothing I can do about it. But... even when the loneliness of this was blocking me and choking me, stopping me with a big wall, I realised I could still move and be there for

myself, I could love my own heart and keep it company. So I sat with my own heart... and then I noticed that my hands... these hands... (we look at her hands, now grey and scabbed with drying clay)... these hands that'd felt so useless, were gently massaging my sore heart behind the wall of loneliness. So, even if no-one else is there for me, I can be there for myself...

She stammers to a halt and we both have bright tears in our eyes. We gaze from her artwork to mine. I gently touch her arm. She lifts and places her hand over her heart in a self-nurturing gesture.

She smiles at me. It's a very different smile to the one she wore into the session. This smile melts the edges of her mouth in softness and infuses her face with vulnerable strength...

I ease away from the telling, becoming aware again of my TeddyBear-Sage sitting on my shoulder. He presses his warm fur into my neck and gently strokes my damp cheek with his paw.
(Journal of the TeddyBear-Sage, November 2014)

My quake and research contexts

In 2010, while I was completing my clinical arts therapy training,³ earthquakes began striking my home province of Canterbury, New Zealand. Alongside my clients, I endured four major quakes, countless aftershocks and, to this day, the grinding aftermath of natural disaster. In 2013, I embarked upon an arts-based PhD⁴ focused on making useful *sens/e* of my experiences between September 2010 and February 2014, during which time I facilitated group sessions with over 300 school pupils and more than 80 adults, and engaged 70 adult and child clients in ongoing one-on-one therapy. To illuminate several ideas nested within this research intention, I disrupt and fragment making-*sens/e* into: knowledge and meaning-making; using the five physical senses to know things more fully in embodied ways; befriending the implicit felt-sense (Rappaport, 2008); evoking the sixth soul-sense; and, orientating – after the French word *sens* [direction] (Levine, 2009) – thus embracing

therapy as creating 'life-forward direction' (Rappaport, 2008).

I am frequently troubled by the mismatch between the *sens/e*-based, multi-faceted, paradoxical and frequently open-ended way we practise as arts therapists and the often rigidly-boundaried way we research this practice – and given my multiplicit *sens/e*-making research quest, traditional research methods felt particularly inappropriate. I thus accepted the invitation from ABR to 'create and critique' (Sullivan, 2006) within the interstitial, open and vulnerable spaces where understandings are generated by multi-vocal, multi-layered uses of language, images, materials, situations, space and time (Irwin & Springgay, 2008; Waller & Sibbett, 2008). I undertook this *sens/e*-making within the larger frame of ABR by interlacing aspects of the autoethnographic culture-of-self (Duncan, 2004), the artist/researcher/therapist⁴ roles of re-imagined *a/r/tography* (Springgay, Irwin & Wilson Kind, 2005), the fact/fiction writing of fiction-based research (Leavy, 2013) with the multi-modal arts therapy practices of FOAT (Rappaport, 2008) and active imagination via images-as-angels (McNiff, 2004).

Three focal areas, borrowed from *a/r/tography*, guided my process. As **Artist**, I wondered what creative processes and products would result when I applied ABR to my quake experiences. As **Researcher**, I wondered how marrying my preferred arts therapy processes with aspects of autoethnographic *a/r/tography* might result in new ways to render ABR. Within this focus, creative 'factionalisation' became a core means to blend autoethnography, *a/r/tography* and arts therapy as research practices, leading to this paper. As **Therapist**, I hoped to better understand and articulate useful new and old-but-reimagined arts-therapy-for-trauma practices that might have grown from my quake experiences.

Arts-based research

My specific use of creative-writing-as-research grew from and was influenced by my implementation of ABR, making key aspects of ABR relevant to this discussion.

Simultaneously a practice, process and product that incorporates a broad continuum of research practices from many traditions, ABR is an ‘aesthetic way of knowing’ (Greenwood, 2012) that involves the systematic use of visual, performing and/or literary artistic practices in data collection/analysis, and/or presentation of research findings (McNiff, 1998, 2013; Manders & Chilton, 2013). As it seeks to engage researcher(s) and audience through participative and experiential methods, ABR often features the provocative use of creative and critical research acts. These complex forms of imagination and intellect offer intersubjective interpretations with creative openness to provoke/invoke manifold useful meanings that emerge through metaphors/symbols found in multi-sensorial art making/viewing experiences (Sinner, Leggo, Irwin, Gouzouasis, & Grauer, 2006; Sullivan, 2006). As a way of making the taken-for-granted everyday world visible (Denzin, 2013b), ABR seeks to lead from the personal to the universal. Chilton (2013) applies Csikszentmihalyi’s (1990) concept of flow to ABR, exploring how this psychological state of optimal engagement activates both explicit and implicit information systems to process and integrate stimuli. As implicit experience-based information is non-verbal and unavailable to conscious awareness, it must be discovered through active processes such as “artistic behaviour” which “provides access to information that the brain retains but which cannot come to consciousness any other way” (Chilton, 2013, p.66). Arts therapy, which also accesses this tacit information using ‘artistic behaviour’, is a good fit with ABR, and arts therapists who use ABR employ artistic knowledge not only as therapy but as a methodological tool for arts therapy research; McNiff (1998) directly calls for research to mirror the therapeutic/transformatory process of arts therapy. This encourages the researcher to become active in her own biography through me-search that is messy, performative, poetic, and reflexive (Denzin 2013a; Ellis & Bochner, 2004). In this way ABR is transformative, both for those involved and of the knowledge generated (Sullivan, 2006).

Within this ABR frame, my research practice interwove aspects of autoethnographic, a/r/tographic, and fiction-based research with arts therapy, providing a poietic-praxis of reflexive ways to gather, generate and analyse information using creative art-making and writing, echoing the principles and philosophies underscoring my therapeutic practice (McNiff, 1998). Poietic-praxis is shorthand for my repeated ‘create and critique’ (Sullivan, 2006) cycles that merge the concrete doing and thinking of praxis with the aesthetic creativity of poiesis (Levine, 2009).

Autoethnography

My autoethnographic focus on self as quake-arts therapist involves the “practice of attempting to discover the culture of self, or of others through self” (Ricci, 2003, p.593). Autoethnography holds no pretence to objectivity and omniscience, relying rather on a postmodern view of truth and reality as local, shifting, co-constructed and uncertain (Ricci, 2003). Yet it provides a means of analysing evidence that both organises a record and enables discovery while encouraging systematic reflection to ensure a scholarly account (Duncan, 2004). Gray (2011) calls on arts therapists to “start generating research that allows them to find their own voice rather than remaining reliant on other disciplines for their professional legitimisation” (p.67). She believes autoethnography resonates with arts therapeutic approaches and thus may produce concepts useful to our discipline – or at least produce clinicians who know themselves in more meaningful ways.

A/r/tography

Within my frame of autoethnographic ABR, I leaned into the contiguous living-inquiry of a/r/tography – “Research that breathes. Research that listens” (Springgay, Irwin & Wilson Kind, 2005). Through simultaneously playing the roles of artist/researcher/therapist (a/r/t) and juxtaposing art-creation and writing, a/r/tography offered me reflexive, challenging and dynamic ways to simultaneously render personal growth and professional research,

fulfilling McNiff's (1998) suggestion that research and therapeutic processes should correspond as closely as possible.

Fiction-based research

I began implementing my arts-based research as autoethnographic a/r/tography, but as I plumbed the richly-layered data within my client-session notes, I realised that I required ways to explore and express these tales without compromising confidentiality. I began using my arts therapy process of dropping-in to craft creative writing vignettes that blended fact and fiction. I subsequently discovered Leavy's (2013) elaborations on this practice of fiction-based research. She believes slippage between fact and fiction can produce meaningful, resonant, evocative and emotional texts offering innumerable possibilities. Fiction grants access via imagination to what is otherwise inaccessible – the complexity of lived experience. Fiction-based research thus invites us to experience empathy and self-reflection, and thus re-examine the worlds we live in.

Arts therapy as research

My preferred quake-therapeutic process involved various applications of what I call 'dropping-in to find what soul is doing' – demonstrated in the 'Finding heART' description above. Dropping-in combines core principles and practices from FOAT (Rappaport, 2008), images-as-angels (McNiff, 2004) and Hillman's (1983) advice that our images reveal what our souls are doing. This therapeutic process – which could be described as personalised me-search using arts-based autoethnographic a/r/tography – also proved surprisingly effective as a research process.

Within my PhD research, I began with a simultaneous review of quake-client session-notes and rhizomatic readings of texts relating to trauma, trauma therapy and arts therapy. Then, using various rounds of poietic-praxis, I dropped-in to gain a deeper sens/e of the core themes this process revealed. As described in the story above, dropping-in entails initial present tense grounding in the physical senses, followed by gentle inward focus to locate where

the theme in question (or the artwork created by previously dropping-in to this theme) resonates within the body. This felt-sense is welcomed, accepted and befriended curiously and without judgement. It is invited to reveal itself fully before being asked to propose a way it may be presented through art. Once a symbolic representation arrives it is checked against the original felt-sense for fit. When it resonates, it is carried back out into the room through a process of reconnecting with the senses in the here-and-now. This representation is then externalised through arts-making. While creating, I engaged in active imagination-based dialogue, treating the artwork as an angel or messenger, usually evoking further creation as the conversation moved to and fro between my felt-sense, the artwork and myself as artist. The deeper knowing that often emerged from this reflexive process opened what I call the 'soul-sense' of this theme.

In my research, this active imagination journey acted as a core part of my analysis and, alongside visual art-making, often resulted in snatches of creative writing that opened conversations between the felt-sense of my quake-work and ideas within the published texts I was consulting. Some of these pieces of creative writing took the form of re-imagined session descriptions as I teased out threads from various successful and troubling real life in-session experiences and wove them together in new ways that afforded me a greater sens/e of my practice.

Example 2: Ignition

I'm hiding, I say to my dead mother (another imaginal figment I call into conversation when I need support while I drop-into reflections on my quake-work). I know, comes the reply.

Uh-uh... Nope, I don't think I've the courage to go there, I say. I know I committed to blending fact and fiction to express, explore and learn-from both the successful and the troubling happenings in my quake-work... and to confess these to others as a way to open conversations about things often kept hidden, but...

We sit in silence. I know she's willing me to counter my urge to sanitise my process of ugly or unsafe or impulsive or awkward moments that show me and my abilities in a less than flattering light.

Like the fire-lighting.

Ok, so there I've begun. And so the story will out... it'll come in shards glued together and re-imagined because, to my great shame, in one wild week I allowed this to happen more than once and with more than one client.

He's young and downcast. Being different weighs heavily, and bullying is a daily feature of his school life. He struggles to talk, the words fat and failing. I offer him clay and paper and paint and pipecleaners and he begins to get the feelings out, into the clay, onto the paper, blown into balloons and wound tight in coloured pipecleaners and wire. His fear and shame and distress and rage pour out. Then he begins to create the bullies that induce these coagulated feelings in him. They're grotesque and penile. I stay with him, sitting in the messy stuff alongside him, letting him know he's not alone.

Finally he emerges, as if from a trance, and together we look at what he's created. We honour his journey and his courage in silence. His breathing is shallow and choppy. I silently allow my own body to connect with his, mirror it, and then I gradually self-soothe, inviting his body to follow. This is done without words, without actively telling him, but his body and mine are in dyadic conversation and he slows and calms.

Then I ask, What does this difficult creation need from you now?

He turns his head eagerly. For the first time his movements are light and fluid. He hops up and, from the shelving, snatches up a box of matches.

I go cold. I'd forgotten them. I offer this option very guardedly to select adult clients, as a release we enact a ritual burning of difficult artworks in a metal pail in my small garden.

But never for the children. From them, the matches remain hidden.



Figure 3. Deborah Green, *Burning*, 2015, Photograph.

Until now.

But he's so lit-up, so alive in a way I have never seen before, so ready to deflate into grey defeat again if I say no.

And so I give in.

We carry the troubling creation outside. It's too large for the pail and so we lay it on the mossy garden paving. And while I fumblingly stutter out clumsy phrases about the dangers of fire and how this should only be done here and NOT at home yadda yadda yadda ... he excitedly strikes matches and begins to set the pipecleaners and lollysticks and paper on fire.

I fall silent.

While my brain is squealing out loud about how dangerous this is – Oh god oh god oh god! he could decide to do this unsupervised at home, at school, under his sister's bed!!

– my heart is fascinated –

the fire fizzes through the pipecleaners, splutters along the wooden sticks, gobbles up the paper...

we hold our breath as the orange and blue flames struggle against the gloopy dark paint, bubbles simmer and pop ... and both whoop in delight as the fire wins and the final pieces crumple into black and grey ashes and smoke.

He's loud and upright and joyous as I've never seen him before. It seems as if the fire has leaped from the artwork and into his soul, igniting him.

I, on the other hand, am suddenly deeply ashamed, a swirling nausea in my belly, and in my head the monkeys are pointing fingers, screeching, and flinging poo.

In my attempts to follow the energy, I lost control of the session completely.

(Conversations with my dead mother, September 2014)

And thus...

I open the invitation for other arts therapists to consider and adapt this emergent ABR practice of marrying fiction-based research with arts therapy as, I believe, it holds great potential. It offers ways for therapists to come to know both the successful and challenging features of their own work more deeply. In addition, the creative merger of fact and creative fiction may be an effective way to share aspects of practice with others in rich, meaningful, emotionally evocative ways that do not break confidentiality yet evoke the lived-felt-sense of actual therapy sessions.

Endnotes

1. Beginning September 2010, Christchurch (Canterbury, New Zealand) has been battered by a swarm of earthquakes: The four major quakes measuring magnitudes 7.1, 6.4, 6.3 and 6 on the Richter scale. The most damaging quake in February 2011 left 185 dead, almost 7000 injured (at least 280 were treated for major trauma), and did massive damage to buildings, roads, the infrastructure and surrounding hills. Following this quake approximately, 1330+ detectable aftershocks (400+ measuring magnitude 4+) have shaken the city, and 1300+ public buildings and 7000+ residential homes have been or will be demolished.
2. The Earthquake Commission is the national body responsible for providing partial financial support to those adversely affected by natural disasters in New Zealand.
3. Through Whitecliffe College of Arts and Design, Auckland, New Zealand
4. Through the University of Auckland, New Zealand. Supervised by Associate Professor Peter O'Connor and Dr Carole Adamson
4. With support from a/r/tography pioneer Irwin (personal communication, 2014), I reframed the 'teacher' role into 'therapist' according to my context.

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