Dialogical Balance:
Working Through My A/r/tographical Self
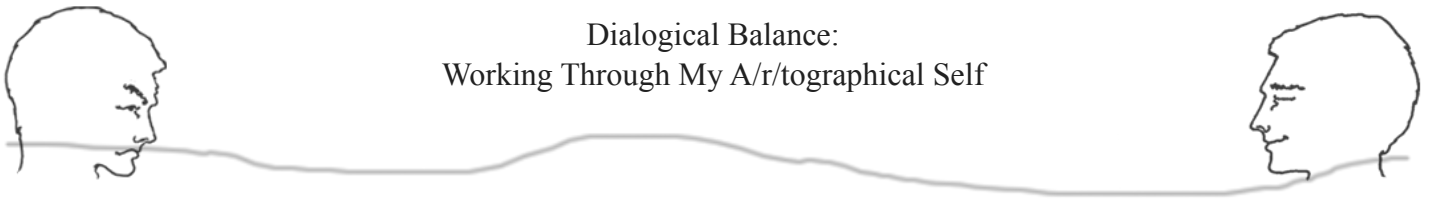
"Purpose emerges as something to be worked towards, rather than as something that is necessarily present at the beginning of the making/experiencing process. Demands are made throughout the process—the perception, selection, and organization of qualities and responsiveness to them. These relationships reorganize thinking in an on-going dialogue."

 – Margaret MacIntyre Latta (2008). Aesthetic Education: The Task of Revisioning, *Journal of Curriculum Studies, 40*(5), p. 692.

"Those who live in the borderlands are re-thinking, re-living, and re-making the terms of their identities as they confront difference and similarity in apparently contradictory worlds."

– Irit Rogoff (2000). *Terra infirma: Geography's visual culture*. In Irwin, R. L. and deCosson, A. (2004). *A/r/tography: Rendering Self Through Arts-Based Living Inquiry*. p. 29.

"A/r/tography…It is the desire to respond to the disappearance and appearance of signs, the impulse between what is known and what cannot be expressed, that gives new tension and vibration to the signifier. Research, thus, becomes an act of unsettling, an evocation that calls out, asking for a response, a living inquiry, transforming static moments into momentum, multiplying and metamorphosing."

– Stephanie Springgay, Rita L. Irwin, Sylvia Wilson Kind (2005). A/r/tography as Living Inquiry Through Art and Text. *Qualitative Inquiry, 2*(6), p. 907.
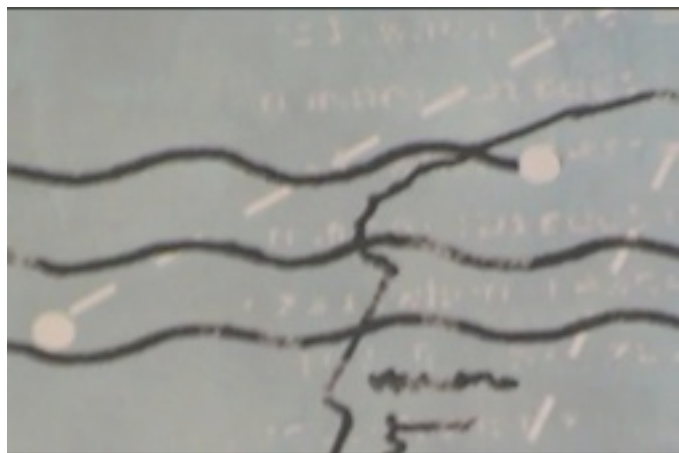
The term "working through" is derived from psychoanalysis and is known as the point of therapy when the subject realizes something relevant and feels a need to replay and reanalyze things continuously. Freud coined the term, describing it as the boring part of the process from the analyst's point of view as he states, "this working-through of the resistances may in practice turn out to be an arduous task for the subject of the analysis and a trial of patience for the analyst" (Freud, 1899). Although not always the most enjoyable part of the therapy process, the act of *working through* is nevertheless crucial to a better understanding of the self and therefore, concepts related to the self. This can also be said for any process that involves creative work. Some of the most significant thinkers of our time constantly replay and reanalyze ideas, through writing and through artistic practices, however, these 'obsessive' acts are rarely understood by others. In writing about the importance of eccentric curriculum, Dennis Sumara (2005) acknowledges that many critical events in the 20th century were generated by "the eccentricities of individuals who strayed from beaten paths, pursuing personal obsessions that only a few could imagine would prove so influential" (Sumara, p. iv). The works left behind by some of these creative individuals reveal dynamic processes of rhythmic repetition and an ongoing dialogue with the self. The aesthetic process I refer to as working through is increasingly relevant to current interdisciplinary inquiries that embrace the intersection of, and the spaces in between, curriculum theory and artistic practice.

Within "Jean-Francois Lyotard's Underground Aesthetics" (1998), John Rajchman describes the postmodern theorist Lyotard's aesthetic writings as "not a methodological aid to historical research or critical appraisal" but instead, "a **tool to expose often unseen tensions**,

shifts, and complications in philosophical thinking and its relations with society." He further

describes Lyotard's writing of theory as "not one philosophy but many talking to one another,

held together without being unified, the notions of aesthetics itself assuming different guises with

the rhythm of their unresolved tensions" (Rajchman, 1998). Through this self-reflective and fluid

process of writing, Lyotard revealed hidden tensions and complications pertaining to theory,

eventually creating new understandings.

Claire Pajaczkowska (2001) describes the early feminist writer Virginia Woolf as an artist

who contested the limitations of liberal humanism in order to find a cultural practice in which the

'divided self' can be acknowledged, explored, deconstructed, and reconstructed. Woolf has been

recognized as an artist who challenged the prestructuralist emphasis on the significance of the

self to explore the significance of division (Pajaczkowska, p. 8). Her writing was deeply rooted

in her own experiences of the brain, as someone who was mentally ill, and she expressed a

divisive tension within her cognitive process by literally incorporating a fragmented mind into

her narratives. In her novel *To the Lighthouse,* there is little plot and the text is dense with the

"process of minds flowing through time" (Lehrer, 2007, p. 175). The narrative is constantly interrupted by thoughts, by thoughts about thought, and thoughts about reality. Her writings expressed an intuitive understanding of "**a self divided against itself**" and her art searched for whatever held us together (Lehrer, 2007). As

Jonah Lehrer demonstrates in his book *Proust was a Neuroscientist* (2007), the work of

neuroscientists Roger Sperry and Michael Gazziniga, (1962 and again in 1981), proved that our

feeling of unified identity was a "mental confabulation" and that "we invented the self in order to ignore our innate contradictions" (Lehrer, p. 180). The author claims that modern neuroscience is now confirming the self that Woolf believed in, ultimately placing importance on the deep insights that artists can contribute to critical research.

In Michael Holquist's introduction to *Speech Genres & Other Late Essays* (1986), a collection of works by literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin, he describes "The Problem of the Text" as typical of most of Bakhtin's essays from his last years. Holquist says that it is not necessarily an essay but rather a series of ideas that Bakhtin jotted down in notebooks over the duration of his life, however, Holquist argues that this informal structure allows the reader to witness Bakhtin's mind at work:

"This lifelong dialogue with himself accounts for many of the features that characterize Bakhtin's style (or, more accurately, *one* of Bakhtin's styles): the allusive structure of his remarks and the repetitiveness that so often bothers readers trained to value more economical and forensic presentations. Anyone expecting a finished, consecutively prosecuted argument in these pieces that have been torn out of the notebooks is bound to be frustrated. But the suspension of such expectations reveals a style that has its own rewards; not the pleasure we derive from an author who compels us to believe his logic is ineluctable, but the excitement that comes from **seeing a mind at work** *while* **it is at work**" (Holquist, 1986, p. xvii).

Bakhtin's philosophical work examines methods of dialogue, among other things, thus it seems fitting that the form of this particular publication of essays reflect the content of the text. In "Task of the Teaching Life: Self Through Bakhtinian Dialogue and Ideological Engagement" (2004), Douglas McKnight examines Bakhtin's 20th century work on dialogue for

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its potential to serve those who teach for existential reasons as opposed to those who view teaching as merely a job or profession. McKnight describes Bakhtin's view of dialogue as part of a structure "within and through which we come to consciousness" and through which we give meaning to our existence and begin to understand our connection to others: "From a Bakhtinian sense, dialogue is the relation between: one's self, a particular ideology within one's self and a piece of media that puts forth a different ideology, and an individual and the institutional discourse that govern him or her" (McKnight, 2004, p. 284).

The points of dialogical relation described by McKnight are akin to the spaces in and between the identities that comprise the a/r/tographical[1] self – the self of the artist, the self of the researcher, and the self of the teacher – interconnected to one another yet often existing in flux. Mikhail Bakhtin, like Virginia Woolfe before him, understood the self to be something that emerged in time and space. For Bakhtin, the self emerges through dialogue; for Woolf, the self emerges through the act of attention and focus. As a visual artist who is comprised of multiple identities that constantly transform and overlap, often in conflict, I am exploring the connections between these two conceptions of self, investigating the space in which they might meet and reflecting upon how my understandings can be applied to the dialogical relations that occur in the teaching and learning experience.

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[1] A/r/tography is a form of arts-based educational research and living inquiry, inherently about self as artist/researcher/teacher. It is a research methodology that combines art and text, intentionally acknowledging the relationship between art, research, and teaching. It is a methodology of embodiment and awareness. In this paper, I am working with visual art, although a/r/tography can consist of other art forms. See Irwin and Springgay references .

Embracing Tension in the Space of Emergence

"Research, thus, becomes an act of unsettling, an evocation that calls out, asking for a response, a living inquiry, transforming static moments into momentum, multiplying and metamorphosing." (Springgay, Irwin, Wilson Kind, 2005, p. 907)
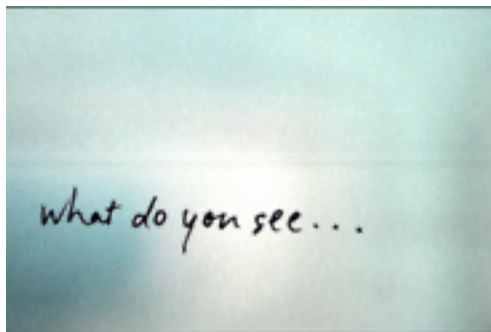

My a/r/tographical project began with the following research questions in mind: 1) How is meaningful knowledge produced through dialogue and conversation in curriculum spaces? in decentralized teaching and learning? in the studio art critique?, and 2) What does the communicative experience in this "dialogical space" look like? During both the textual and visual processes of my inquiry, these questions transformed into many more questions, including 1) How can the dialogical process of learning be captured and expressed?, and 2) How can digital media be used to personalize knowledge? This essay will cover connecting themes analysed within previous writings[2] in which I investigated these questions, however, I will focus

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[2] Written reviews for CUST 570: [**A/r/togapher** – Stephanie Springgay] *Stephanie Springgay: Relational Meaning and Learning through Embodied Dialogue*; [**Artist** – Ingrid Koenig] *Art that Examines How We Know: Investigating the Construction of Knowledge*; and [**Researcher** – Elizabeth Ellsworth] *Dialogical Possibilities: Embracing Uncertainty in New Curriculum Spaces*

primarily on new understandings that have evolved since I presented my experimental video piece *Embracing Tension in the Space of Emergence* (since renamed *Dialogical Space*). The video conveys an abstract, visual expression of the rhythmic relationship that occurs between tensions of ambiguity and clarity within a dialogical space of communication. It is an experimental, temporal mixture of painting, classroom overheads of handwriting, diagrams from textbooks, digital illustrations, handwritten notes, all of which are layered in a painterly manner to capture the aesthetic experience of knowledge communicated through dialogue. One might perceive this video as a representation of the *invisible* aspects of knowledge production. Elizabeth Ellsworth wrote about knowledge in *Places of Learning: Architecture, Media, Pedagogy* (2005), as a grid of scripted schemas and concepts suggesting, "The grid has no ability to "see" knowledge as it is in the making. It has no faculty to sense the movement/sensation out of which knowledge itself emerges: the experience of the learning self in making" (Ellsworth, p. 120).

Dialogical Space attempts to capture in visual form, ways of knowing that are not easily transformed into words, thus suggesting the experience of memories and dreams. The work connects to my art practice of the past ten years, a series of pieces that consistently invite the viewer to question what they are seeing, ultimately inviting them to question his/her relationship with memories, the mind, and the technologies that function as a mediator between what they see and what they know. My art provoke the viewer to question the nature of the media forms in front of them, as they appear to be a hybrid of still and moving technologies from the past and present. In an essay by Heather Passmore, the author appropriately describes my work as "the complex inter-network structuring

(of) our visual-perceptual field" suggesting that "distilled in this way, these qualities appear most meaningful as we realize the invisibility of that which is so familiar to us" (Passmore, 2003).

To truly embody a/r/tography as a form of living inquiry, acknowledging the significant relationships between the three identities and the impact these roles have on one another, this essay will explore not only the dialogical processes I believe to be reflected within the

construction of my video, but also the dialogical and hermeneutic processes of my a/r/tographical self – aligning Bakhtin's concept of self (that which emerged in dialogue) with pedagogy and Woolf's concept of self (that which emerges through the act of attention) with awareness felt in the art-making process. In *Art and Answerability* (1919), Bakhtin wrote that there is often a mechanical separation of the human being and the artist, arguing that these components need to answer to each other,

> "But what guarantees the inner connection of the constituent elements of a person? Only the unity of answerability. I have to answer with my own life for what I have experienced and understood in art, so that everything I have experienced and understood would not remain ineffectual in my life." (Bakhtin, 1919, p. 1-2)

In this essay, I have chosen to respond to Bakhtin's appeal for a dialogue between multiple selves, answering to my human self with what my artist self has recently experienced. Following a class presentation of the video described above, I became more aware of the dialogical processes that went into the physical and mental construction of the work, a back and forth process between a range of materials and concepts. I then discovered this quotation by Bakhtin

and found it to be quite significant in terms of the state I find myself in at this point in my life. It made me think more deeply about something I already knew but hadn't allowed myself to contemplate fully – my interest in dialogue as a self-reflective pedagogical tool in relation to the visual structure of the inner dialogue of my own mind, or at least how I imagine its visual form to be. This is also representative of my sense of instability within the undefined areas in and between curriculum theory and art.

In this essay, I reflect upon my a/r/tographical process of inquiry into dialogical methods, which has now led me to examine the metonymical meaning (Irwin & Springgay, 2008) of the self as being "worked through" within and in between my roles as artist, educator, researcher, and student. In an attempt to unfold in/sights (Irwin, 2003) through the process of reflecting on my own work, I have chosen to acknowledge my struggle for mental balance in the borderlands of art, research, and teaching (Irwin, 2004). As I attempt to embrace ambiguity and tension in my work, I should note that I have chosen to position myself as both researcher and subject for this essay, working through "excess" (see Irwin & Springgay, 2008; Springgay et al, 2005) in a
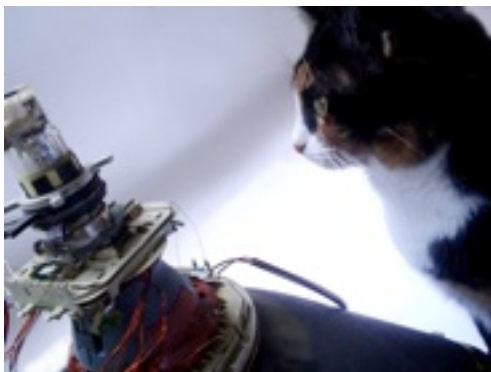
manner that I intend to be not nearly as confusing as the subject matter itself, being mindful that purpose emerges through the experience of on-going dialogue (Latta, 2008). Images are incorporated throughout the text to better inform the reader, not necessarily as visual explanation of what is written, but rather to potentially advance the Bakhtinian sense of dialogue into an unknown area, one that can perhaps be accessed through a/r/tography (see Bal, 2002 referenced in Springgay et al, 2005).

image: Heidi May, *In Between,* 2009

My A/r/tographical Self

"This becoming through writing reveals fears, inhibitions, desires, and pleasures:
To write from within and through the body is a writing of *excess*." (Springgay,
Irwin, Wilson Kind, 2005, p. 907)

In her introduction to *A/r/tography: Rendering Self Through Arts-Based Living Inquiry*
(2004) Rita Irwin states that the dialectial stance between theory and practice in educational
endeauvours is no longer effective unless we incorporate "a multilectical view that encourages
thirdness, an in-between space that exists between and among categories" (Irwin, p. 28). My
"self" has always existed between and among categories, never static and content. Looking back
to my childhood, I can think of many
instances that might have contributed
to this sense of not belonging, yet I
could also chose to describe myself
as someone who refuses to be
categorized. I like that my artistic and
theoretical ideas lend themselves to
interdisciplinary areas of research that could potentially be valued as innovative pursuits,
however, I often feel that a clearly defined direction might benefit my mental well-being. I desire
simplicity and stability in all areas of my life, yet am prone to complex ways of thinking.

Several years ago I was diagnosed with depression, a mental illness that has now become
so commonplace that the word itself has lost the weight it once had during Virginia Woolf's time
(mind you, Woolf's condition was much more severe than my own). At the time, it felt like the
end of the world and I suddenly understood what people meant when they described the
experience of a "black cloud" overtaking them. This "condition" emerged soon after graduating

image*: Heidi May, *Recall #9, 1999-2000*

with a Masters degree, following a successful career as a student for eighteen years straight. Perhaps this darkness surfaced as I struggled to locate my self in a world without academic structure, without an easily defined category to belong to. A person with depression needs to constantly replace negative thoughts with positive ones, working towards a mental and emotional balance. Knowing what I needed to do but not being able to do it, one of the therapists I visited told me to "resist the urgency" and just do what made me happy. Easier said than done. (I now find it ironic that my academic quest for curriculum and pedagogy is to "embrace the tension").

During this time, I had become immobilized by certain ideas I had been taught in graduate school about the professional art world, and I remember the same therapist saying that it would likely be impossible for me to "just make art" without these conflicting thoughts of fear and anxiety. I gravitated more and more towards teaching, as it nurtured the critical dialogue that my self craved, and eventually allowed me to perceive the artistic characteristics of pedagogy (while
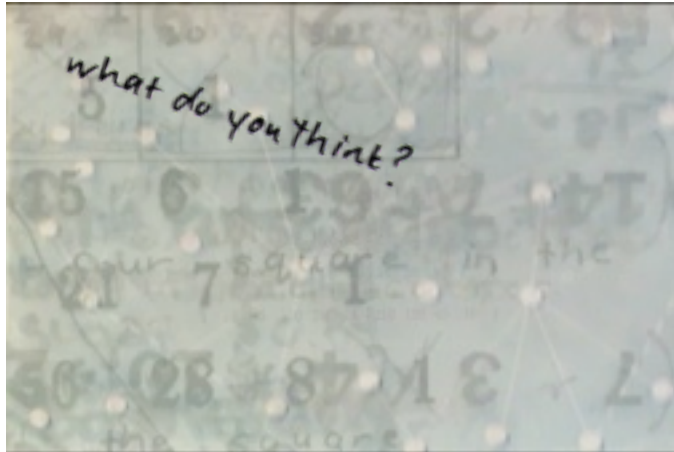
also attending to accumulating debt from student loans). I managed to continue to make artwork, at times making visible the inner workings of cognitive thought in relation to media and memory, yet very conscious of the work not being all about me. As I have recently immersed myself in processes of a/r/tographical inquiry, my art self is perhaps responding more to my human self, producing what Bakhtin describes as a "unity of answerability."

Merging Selves in Emergent Knowledge

"Between metaphor and metonymy there exists an intertwined relationship in which meaning un/does itself. There is both a loss of meaning and simultaneously a realization of it, invoking the presence of what it is not, and also what it might become. Distinct in appearance and application, both help us to see and reveal attributes in new ways, to cross boundaries, and to shape intersubjective relationships ...A shift in awareness takes place within these openings, which can be attributed to struggle or tension…" (Springgay, Irwin, and Wilson Kind, 2008, p. 905)

As my a/r/tographical self refuses to be confined to one category, the mind shifts back and forth between the analytical and associative modes of its creative task at hand. In developing an artistic concept to explore, my focus is interrupted by a constant stream of ideas, each one connected to another, revealing rhizomatic relations in and across disciplines of contemporary art, visual culture, pedagogy and critical theory. As I start to work with the visual materials, moments occur in which clarity exists and in which the Bakhtinian self emerges intermittently, yet the dialogue between the contrasting media continues. At times I become enamoured with the visual form, the contrast of movement and light and the hypnotic quality of pictorial space. In these attentive acts of visual focus, the Woolfean self can feel at ease in the presence of something new.

The video *Dialogical Space* was created through a complicated process that involved moving between different media in an intuitive manner that might appear to some as a calculated technical process. I tend to do things the long way, not necessarily out of choice, however, I have found that interesting realizations can happen along the way…unexpected results through trial

11   image*: Heidi May, Mental Note: It's Not You (detail),* 2003

and error. My concepts usually lend themselves to low-tech aesthetics, so any lack of technical

skill I might have can sometimes work in my favour. The handmade imagery needed to be

photographed/scanned and imported into the computer, some of which needed to be adjusted in

order to be digitally layered and superimposed one on top of another. The textured painting, line

drawings, graphic diagrams and classroom overheads were then arranged into a series of

compositions on the computer in order to be printed. I work and see like a painter, no matter

what media I am working with, so these forms are arranged just as one would paint, however, the

canvas is replaced by the digital screen and the paintbrush with a plastic mouse. During this

stage of the art-making, I lose all sense of time. The prints are then mounted to the wall for me to

record on video, employing rhythmic movement in a manner that represents the visual

abstraction of a contemplative conversation. As I do this, I consciously think about how I am

looking at the image and what my thought process might look like if projected into this space

that exists between the camera and the image. I do this several times with different compostions

After importing the video into the computer, I work

through the overall "narrative" flow while

consciously avoiding anything too literal. This is the

difficult part of the artistic production– theory,

combined with the analytic mode of my creative

process, fights to take control of the final form.

The process of art-making can indeed be an

escape from the mind, however, when looked at

closely, the cognitive process reveals dynamic movement that suggests active thinking, perhaps a

different kind of thinking. As I intuitively layer the different imagery on the screen, replaying

sections of the video repeatedly in order to obtain the feeling I am going for, I am reminded of

something my friend jasna guy wrote in an email response to a recent essay I wrote describing

connections between Ingrid Koenig's artwork and my own. She responded to the way I had

incorporated text in my piece *Mental Note: It's Not You* (2003), stating "For me the text/image

plays with the notions that thinking is inseparable from the process of art-making, that thoughts

and image are interconnected and function

as mark and gesture, and as words,

synchronically and

diachronically" (personal communication,

March 12, 2009). Although my main

intention was to express a psychological

struggle in relation to text and image in

contemporary popular culture, particularly the self-help industry, her comment made me more

aware of how the work also expressed a personal struggle as an artist who also writes and

teaches. Perhaps the relationship between thinking and art-making was made even more apparent

as she encountered this artwork for the first time within the context of a written essay. The

Mental Note piece is about a mental struggle, a kind of balancing act that occurs in the cognitive

system. I feel it makes visible what is perceived as invisible, both in terms of our relationship to

the culture that surrounds us in a daily lives but also our relationship to ourselves and, for me, it

now also represents a dialogue between my human self and my artist self.

Returning back to work on *Dialogical Space*, my mind can't help but think of the

conceptual layers at work – how the dialogue that occurred via email now occupies a

participatory role in the current dialogue I am having with this experimental video, which just

image*: Heidi May, *Mental Note: It's Not You (detail),* 2003

happens to be *about* dialogue and is visually expressed within and through a dialogical

relationship across and between various media (!). Ideas emerge related to the task at hand (I am

not conscious of where they come from or how much is being triggered by this recent train of

thought) and I remember other imagery that I can bring into my dialogical landscape on the

screen. They aren't in my digital archive so I need to scan them in. I then get another idea that

involves printing and returning back to the video camera. Fortunately, this all takes place within

my little 10' x 10' workspace, spanning a few hours that feel more like thirty minutes. My artist

self now asks my human self why it was unable to start this process sooner….

**How ~~is~~ can meaningful knowledge [be] produced through dialogue ~~and conversation~~
in curriculum ~~spaces~~? in decentralized teaching and learning? in the studio art
critique?**

> "The epistemology of emergence therefore calls for a switch in focus for curricular
> thinking, away from questions about presentation and representation and towards
> questions about engagement and response;…In the vocabulary of complexity we
> could say that knowledge emerges from our transactions with our environment and
> feeds back into this same environment, such that our environment becomes increasingly
> meaningful for us" (Osberg, Biesta, & Cilliers, 2008, p. 213 and p. 223).

In *Curriculum Development in the Postmodern Era* (2nd ed.), Slattery describes the act of

interpretation as something that should emphasize possibility and becoming since human

consciousness can never be static (2006, p. 282). The idea of human consciousness never being
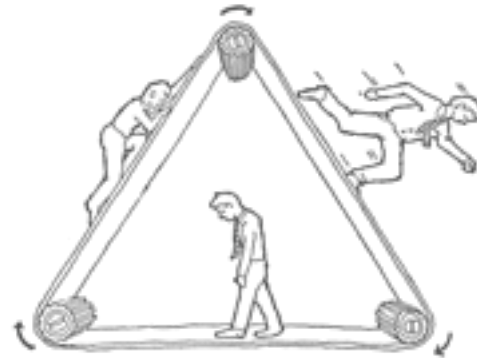
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static is similar to the view of knowledge being a complex system of evolving rhizomatic forms. Knowledge is understood as the result of a dialogical process through a non-linear exchange of ideas. Complex and decentralized approaches to teaching are most appropriate for learning situations in which there exists more than one response to a topic. There must be more than one interpretive possibility to begin with and structures need to be in place for ideas to stumble across one another – this being more important than the way the physical system is organized (Davis, Sumara, Luce-Kapler, 2008, p. 199). *Dialogical Space* explores the aesthetic experience of awareness and learning that emerges in a decentralized space – through dialogue between the self and others and, as I have proposed above with the help of Bakhtin, through dialogue of the self.
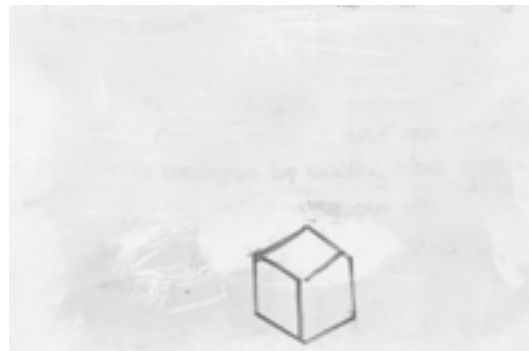
The educational (or dialogical) space in which emergent knowledge occurs has been written about by various curriculum theorists, albeit each defining the phenomenon with different language to describe its intangible qualities. For instance, Aoki wrote about the *live(d) curriculum* as something in opposition to planned curriculum, describing the space as a "rhizomean curricular landscape" (Aoki, Pinar, & Irwin, 2005). Aoki suggests that the rhizomean landscape signifies the multiplicity of curricula that occurs in the learning space and the relationships that that happen 'between' the teacher and students – the exchanges of communication. The rhizome form is divergent, extending in all directions, and rather than being comprised of a set of points and positions, it consists of lines in metamorphis (Deleuze & Guittari, 1987). My description of the creative process for this a/r/ tographical project demonstrates a rhizomatic flow between theory and practice, and between a variety of different media forms.

Dialogical Space is situated in a complex environment with a structure that allows for ideas to interact with each other – two heads placed on either side with a line positioned in between – and evolves into a rhizomatic experience, almost a mapping or working out of possibilities and connections. Certain forms appear and disappear in the same position to provide a sense of stability, yet the movement of the camera, along with the gestural markings of paint, suggest unpredictability. In describing the rhizomatic form, Deleuze and Guitari (1987) write, "A rhizome may be broken, shattered at a given spot, but it will start up again on one of its old lines, or on new lines… these lines always tie back to one another" (p. 9). The video begins with the camera in "real" space depicting an active line of running water, and then takes the viewer into another reality in which the water line is replaced by a line that appears to be drawn on screen, fading in and out of the picture. Though the screen becomes more layered with imagery perceived as disruptions, in addition to the subtle sound of electronic static trying to break through, the viewer is taken back to the spacious place where the aesthetic journey began, however, the journey is not over just yet. The visuals reflect a dialogue between participants of a meaningful dialogue, one that is non-linear and subjective. I have experienced this dialogue within group critiques of student artwork in which the visual work becomes the object of attention and knowledge emerges and trickles through the space, just as the line does in the video.
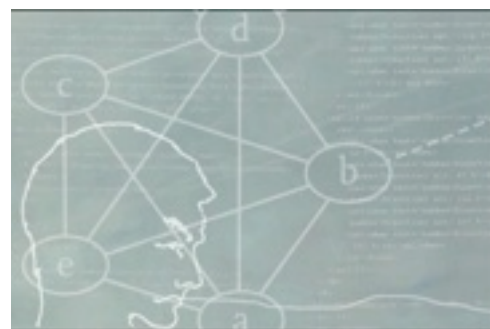
Is it *meaningful* knowledge? Has the knowledge been *personalized* by the participants? These are questions for a future paper that includes examples of student work and experiences, however, I argue here that this kind of knowledge comes from "temporal epistemology," a quest for knowledge that is not based on developing more accurate understandings of a finished reality but rather "(this) quest for knowledge is about finding more and more complex and creative ways of interacting with our reality" (Osberg, Biesta, and Cilliers, 2008, p. 215).

The concept and methods associated with dialogical space, in connection to teaching and learning, can be understood both on a macro level (group interaction) and a micro level (the self). Aesthetic processes of inquiry, such as a/r/tography, allow for a working through and quest for balance that often exists in the temporal space between the two. The purpose of this investigative journey is not always clear at the beginning yet tends to emerge through the experience of on-going dialogue.

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This is a rhizomatic "snapshot" of all of the text in this essay, created through Wordle (www.wordle.net) The following pages contain snapshots of some of the visual research conducted since the creation of *Dialogical Space*, which can be viewed on the accompanying disk.

"wordle" compositions of text from each of the three essays
leading up to this final paper combined with video stills

A selection of collaged imagery and text from concepts explored
in the written essays and imagery disected from the video.