Stephanie Springgay: Relational Meaning and Learning through Embodied Dialogue

“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.”


In Margaret MacIntyre Latta’s 2008 review of David Granger’s book John Dewey, Robert Pirsig, and the Art of Living: Revisioning Aesthetic Education, the author notes similarities in the way Granger describes the aesthetic experiences of Dewey and Pirsig, emphasizing the significance of dialogue and interaction. The author discusses how Granger recognizes this back and forth process that occurs in the work of both Dewey and Pirsig as “at times tactile dialogue, and at other times more visual, and sometimes more emotional” (Latta, p. 692). Latta describes this “ongoing dialogue” as being central to the aesthetic experience, something that I have often thought about within my own research as an artist and teacher. Dialogue has recently become a conceptual topic of interest for me, as it connects to my research of decentralized forms of curriculum and non-hierarchical power relationships in the teaching and learning experience.

This research and writing has enhanced my understanding of how I have explored concepts of dialogue and communication in my art, inspiring new possibilities for me to explore. Dialogue also seems to be a significant aspect to the field of a/r/tography – dialogue between the different practices that make up its name (artist, researcher, teacher), between different epistemological ways of being, and between different communities and educational spaces.

As I pursue a deeper, more critical understanding of a/r/tography as a form of dialogue and begin to better understand a/r/tography as a methodological framework based on “rhizomatic
relations” (Irwin, et al, 2006), I have chosen to examine an a/r/tographer whose work I feel definitely evolves out of the dialogical relationships between her art, research, and teaching. Stephanie Springgay is an a/r/tographer who combines and “folds” (Springgay, 2004a) her interests across and within her work as a multidisciplinary artist, an academic researcher and, an assistant professor in art education. She explores the relationships between aesthetics and knowledge by bridging the tactile and imaginary, by analyzing the meaning of words, such as “fold” and “seam”, through a back and forth process that incorporates the sensory experience belonging to sight and touch (see Figure 1).

![Figure 1](https://www.springgay.com)

**Figure 1** – Video stills taken from *Mouth Speaking Flesh* (www.springgay.com); Artist statement: *Mouth Speaking Flesh* is a thinking that reflects the intercorporeality of bodies, of flesh, and folds of desire and disgust, pleasure and insurgency. The video evokes a fascination with the relation between interiority and exteriority and bodily association of certain surfaces, materials, and forms.

In discussing visual art as research, Springgay describes it as a way: “… to envision and re-conceptualize aesthetic experiences in knowing and being…(which) includes seeing the
unordinary and finding ways to express the hidden, the difficult, and the uncertain” (Springgay, 2003, para. 6). Springgay’s artistic research addresses the role the body plays in creating knowledge and her scholarly writings challenge presumptions and methodological criteria associated with traditional forms of curriculum (Springgay, 2002). Her publications consist of philosophical and theoretical arguments pertaining to ways of knowing and incorporate personal reflections from her art-making process and teaching experiences.

This paper will focus on certain themes within Springgay’s work that are connected to my own research interests – relational meaning and dialogical spaces, the uncertainty within embodied knowledge, and the ethics of embodiment. As these themes are closely related to one another within Springgay’s work, and at times interdependent on each other, I have chosen not to divide the text into thematic sections but rather weave the concepts together in a manner that represents her work as an a/r/tographer. It is this weaving of concepts that I feel to be the most significant characteristic for an a/r/tographer to behold, ultimately merging theory and practice into unified forms of understanding –interconnecting lines of thought like that of a rhizome (see Figure 2). Stephanie Springgay seems to exemplify this important characteristic, perhaps setting an example for the future of a/r/tography. Throughout this essay, I will continually draw attention to what I have discovered to be a connecting element between Springgay’s research and my own – meaning and learning as relational. I have also chosen to incorporate ideas from curriculum theory, arguing that Springgay’s arts-based research responds to recent appeals for self-reflective approaches to contemporary curriculum and pedagogy.

Within “Arts-Based Research as an Uncertain Text” (2002), Springgay references writing from her MA thesis titled The Body Knowing (2001) that reveals an early understanding of a/r/tographical inquiry: “It is this temporality of art making, the uncertainties and ambiguities of
which, create conditions that allow for the unexpected in teaching, researching, and in knowing…disrupting our dwelling in language, disrupting ourselves, our self-understanding.” In this statement Springgay points to the role art plays in the creation of meaning and knowledge by acknowledging how it allows for uncertainties and disruptions within the teaching and learning process and allows for a different way of knowing. More specifically, she is referring to the temporality of art-making materials (the use of rose petals and thread within her artwork) and how they create conditions for the unexpected to occur within teaching and arts-based research. Springgay works within the “seam” – in and between the boundaries of artist, scholar, and teacher – in order to access the unknown and to move beyond language towards new meanings and understandings: “It is located in the seam, where ephemeral experiences acknowledge a luminous, transformative connection between art and audience, between bodies present and bodies absent” (Springgay 2002, p. 18). In my own work I have described this area of the unknown as a “dialogical space” in which knowledge emerges through hermeneutic inquiry and self-reflectivity with/in the relations of participants and objects in the teaching and learning experience. Similar to Springgay’s understanding of the seam as a metaphor of experience (Springgay, 2004b), this dialogical space that I write about can be described as that which creates knowledge, rather than merely the teacher or the student. It is the meaning produced through these relational acts that creates knowledge and understanding within this dialogical space.

This space where knowledge emerges has been studied by various curriculum theorists, albeit each defining the phenomenon with different language to describe its intangible qualities. Ted Aoki wrote about the “live(d) curriculum” as something in opposition to planned curriculum and explained the concept by using a visual illustration (see Figure 3) of what he defined as the
“rhizomean curricular landscape” (Pinar & Irwin, 2005, p. 419). Aoki suggests that the rhizomean landscape signifies the multiplicity of curricula that occurs in the learning space and the relationships that happen “between” the forms that represent the teacher and students – the exchanges of communication – drawing particular attention to the “ands” which represent the spaces that separate definable ideas. In quoting Deleuze and Parnet (1987) he draws attention to the term “multiplicity” not being a noun, since within multiplicity it is not the elements that matter but what is in between them, “…as site of relations which are not separable from each other” (Pinar & Irwin, 2005, p. 420). From this perspective, curriculum is about the experience and the process, the relations of the “in between”, ultimately leading to self-reflection and critical inquiry.

Figure 2 – illustration by author


In Curriculum Development in the Postmodern Era (2nd ed.), Patrick 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 static is similar to the view of knowledge being a complex system of evolving rhizomatic forms. Slattery cites William Pinar and Madeleine Grumet (1976) for challenging the field to examine
internal experiences rather than the external objectives by promoting the use of research in philosophy, psychology, literature, and art to inform a reconceptualized curriculum (Slattery, p. 62). Pinar reconceptualized curriculum as a process or experience that he defined as *currere*, the verb form of curriculum, which emphasizes the individual’s own capacity to reconceptualize his or her autobiography (Slattery, p. 62). In Pinar’s writing he focuses more on the individual’s experience, describing *currere* as an inward journey, emphasizing the importance of the autobiographical experience. Aoki’s rhizomean curricular landscape, focuses more on the social interaction within the space of the learning environment. Regardless of the specific language used by Aoki and Pinar to describe these ephemeral aspects of the learning experience, both emphasize the temporal and animated nature of knowledge and being. Springgay’s art and research can be understood as a response to both Pinar’s request for knowledge that stems from internal experiences and Aoki’s acknowledgement of a curricular landscape based on relational and dialogical interactions with other beings. Stephanie Springgay argues for an embodied knowledge that stems from both the physical and intangible relations that occur within the rhizome of a/r/tographical practices, and she often describes knowledge as a form of *being* as opposed to something tangible.

Throughout much of Springgay’s research she has explored knowledge that emerges through the sense of touch, something of which she describes in her writings between 2001 and 2005 as “body knowledge” yet more recently emphasizes the word “embodiment” (Springgay, 2008a, 2008b) – a term which I feel represents a deeper understanding of the uncertainties surrounding knowledge learned through art. Touch can be understood as a way of knowing through sensations of physical contact and/or a sense of being in a proximal relation with something (Springgay, 2005). Body knowledge through touch enables us to think through the
body and suggests ‘other than’ potentialities (Springgay, 2004a). Springgay references Graeme Sullivan (2003) in stating that scholars within the field of art education are responding to research that places or defines art making as a process of knowledge production, further recognizing this as a “displacement that calls attention to the body and the ways in which we come to know, with, in, and through the body” (Springgay, 2005, p. 35). Although my own interests deals more with the workings of the mind as opposed to the body, Springgay and I share a desire to explore an engaged pedagogy that moves the passive individual towards becoming an active participant and learner. Her work with body knowledge has encouraged me to think more about the physical being in relation to the identity of the learner and the audience, particularly how body encounters can compel different ways of thinking.

In her PhD dissertation Springgay wrote: “Teaching and learning through touch encourages ambiguity and tension recognizing that difficult knowing ruptures open the bodies and lives of students and teachers” (Springgay, 2004a, p. 254). She then references bell hooks (1994) in understanding the need to embrace the vulnerability of teaching and learning in order to produce ‘engaged pedagogy’. Curriculum research Lisa Cary echoes this concern for us to embrace undecidability and uncertainty as teachers since the construction of the ‘good teacher’ “promotes the mastery of technical competence that ignores the im/possibilities of learning by reducing teaching to simplistic representations” (Cary, 2007, p. 132). Springgay’s pedagogical approach is definitely not about simplistic representations but rather an emphasis on understanding forms and concepts connected to the self/body through experiences that occur in relation to others. The artwork that Springgay creates amidst her theoretical research of embodiment and knowledge is translated into the classroom experience and the classroom experience is then translated back into her research and art practice, exemplifying interconnected relationships within dialogical
spaces.

In a paper presented at the American Education Research Association in 2003 named “Communities seeing themselves seeing: Visual art as educational research,” Springgay describes her experience creating a performance-based video art work in which she weaves red wool between several trees in a park nearby a beach: “The intertwined folds of wool act as signifiers for cradles, nets, texts and extensions of my body.” When viewing the video stills placed within this essay (see Figure 4), the lines of wool can be understood to create a rhizome that invites interaction, play, and movement within the space. The rhizome can be understood as a metaphor for relational meaning and reminds me of Springgay’s research in which she references the words of feminist philosopher Elizabeth Grosz (2001) in stating that it is the space in-between things where understandings occur (Springgay, 2008a, p. 155).

As she is wrapping the wool from tree to tree, an elderly man strikes up a conversation with her and she describes her interests with weaving, the process of mark making and their erasure. The man tells her that as he walks the beach he likes to watch the waves form patterns and observe the residue of the sea. This conversation illustrates a formed connection between Springgay and the man. Although Springgay doesn’t include an analysis of this encounter, it speaks to her interest in “participatory aesthetics” (Gablik (1991) cited in Springgay, 2004c) and aestheticism that encourages the observer to become part of the creation process. Springgay describes participatory aesthetics as a process that, "repositions the body so that knowledge is constructed with, in, and through the individual and the social body as an opening or a point of departure” (p. 78, Springgay, 2004c). This small, and seemingly insignificant moment within this academic paper also connects to Springgay’s appeal for an ethical approach to teaching, learning, and being that considers the act of embodiment (Springgay, 2008a, 2008b).
In the nature of a/r/tography, Springgay extends her research and the experience in the park described above into the student learning environment. The *Communities seeing themselves seeing* project proceeds to include images of Springgay’s students participating in the creation of embodied knowledge by interacting with the red wool, and instead of connecting the trees by stretching the wool from tree to tree, they form a rhizome with their own bodies functioning as the points of intersection (see Figure 4).

I suggest that this bodily formation (and dialogical interaction) can be understood as a visual and performative illustration of the concept of relational meaning, illustrating how it can occur within the space of learning, and ultimately aligning itself with Aoki’s rhizomean curricular landscape.
This participatory embodied experience, captured in the images above, evolved out of Sprinngay’s doctoral research in which she examined the ways youth understand and negotiate body knowledge through touch. It is a good example of how art might be incorporated into curriculum in order to teach and learn concepts that are unrelated to art – an example of knowing through doing. It also illustrates how art education can be understood not only as the teaching of visual representations and reflections but something more, suggesting a “shift in awareness from art as objective and illustrative of culture, towards an understanding of art as a way of knowing and being…” (Springgay, 2005, p. 35). If art educators were to explore a/r/tographical research for methods of pedagogy they would be engaging with forms of knowledge construction found within contemporary art and would also be responding to the appeal from curriculum theorists (Aoki, Slattery, Pinar) for education that relates to the postmodern (perhaps post-postmodern) aesthetic experience.

Springgay’s most recent published writing moves towards a closer examination of ethics in which she suggests that we shift away from the understanding of “getting to know the other” towards research grounded in an ethics of embodiment that works from the perspective of
“being-with” (Springgay, 2008a, p. 156) and an “aesthetic of sensation” (Kennedy, 2004 cited in Springgay, 2008b, p. 2.) Relating this to my own interests with the experiences that occur in dialogical spaces, I find myself returning to the words of curriculum researcher David Smith, a scholar whom both Springgay and I have cited in each of our work. Exploring questions about what lies beyond the limits of language allows us to try to articulate an understanding of “what we do not understand and for which we may not at present have words” (Smith, 1999, p. 128). With dialogue and conversation surrounding responses to art a connection amongst participants must exist in order to allow for emergent knowledge of what we may not understand with words. The dialogical relationship must be “committed to staying ‘with’ each other, constantly listening” (Smith cited in Slattery, 2006, p. 244). Through Springgay’s ongoing a/r/tographical dialogue between her art, research, and teaching, a commitment to “listening” is revealed in/ between the three different components of her work, ultimately demonstrating meaning that is relational.
References:


http://www.coe.iup.edu/kjkmoran


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http://www.ccfi.educ.ubc.ca/publication/insights/v12n02/articles/springgay/index.html