Using Participatory Action Research, Narrative Inquiry, and Arts-Based Research to Explore Art Educator Practices

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Abstract
This article describes a Participatory Action Research (PAR) study that took place from November 2020 to March 2021 with four art educators from the United States. The PAR team utilized narrative inquiry and arts-based research methods to investigate the potential intersections of their specific artist educator practices and the field of creative placemaking. This study showcases a PAR framework that explores the way narrative inquiry and arts-based research were useful methods of inquiry to better understand the specific artist educator practices the PAR team identified regarding their specific professional settings, community contexts, and approach to art education.

Keywords
Participatory Action Research; narrative inquiry; arts-based research; creative placemaking; artist practice

Introduction
This article outlines a qualitative Participatory Action Research (PAR) study that occurred from November 2020 to March 2021 with four artist educators from around the United States (Patel, 2021). The PAR team engaged in narrative and arts-based inquiry to answer questions around their specific practice as art educators in varying community contexts, cities, and professional settings. Participatory Action Research centers people and their expertise within the issues being explored so that we are researching our own experiences and concerns (McIntyre, 2008; People’s Knowledge Editorial Collective, 2016; Stringer, 2007; Stringer & Ortiz Aragon, 2021). This PAR study is transformative in providing a collaborative framework that engaged educators in broader discourses surrounding artist practices, pedagogy, and creative placemaking (Markusen & Gadwa, 2010) and what role (if any) the art educator has within creative community building (Borrup, 2006, 2016) discourses. The PAR framework the team agreed upon and utilized occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic and utilized virtual meeting platforms and arts-based research (ABR) to
articulate our varying practices and engagement with creative placemaking/creative community-building work.

The team of art educators engaged in a PAR study to investigate their own practice(s) and potential intersections with the field of creative placemaking. This study is grounded in critical theory to engage in inquiry that can promote a deeper understanding of our own contexts and support transformation through dialogic work (Freire, 1972) with art educators to elevate and voice the unique experiences and expertise they bring to the research (Foucault, 1980; Hilsen, 2006). My participant collaborators brought their expertise as a high school art educator, a museum educator, and an arts education consultant. Utilizing a PAR framework, dialogic work occurred virtually through semi-structured interviews, a group call, and individual arts-based inquiry to answer research questions surrounding their work within art education and intersection and divergence with the field of creative placemaking. Using narrative storied approaches (Clandinin, 2013, 2020; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; McNiff, 2007) and arts-based methods, the PAR team shared specific stories where their work as art education professionals converges with creative placemaking and the distinct separation they find among the fields. The interconnections between PAR, narrative inquiry, and arts-based research can be linked through the work of experience and knowledge (Leavy, 2015).

Through this emergent and collaborative process, our narrative and arts-based work showcases four emergent intersections and divergences that arose through a diffractive analysis of the data. One prominent emergent theme recognizes the art educator as “creative initiator.” And the divergences directly relate to conducting a PAR study during the COVID-19 pandemic. I posit that the emergent concepts demonstrate intersection with creative placemaking but also showcase the varying strategies art educators employ to successfully support and serve their respective stakeholders through a broad range of practices.

**Starting Points for the PAR Study**

This PAR study arose from my own work as an art educator to further interrogate the work I have done and continue to do with schools and communities. These interrogations brought me to explore the terms and field of creative placemaking and creative community building. These experiences and my experiences with fellow educators around the country had brought me to engage in my doctoral studies around these concepts. As I began exploring these concepts, the stories, and narratives of work I had engaged in were catalyzing conversation starters with fellow art educators and the work they were doing with their respective communities.

These stories and dialogues led me to explore how to clarify the field of creative placemaking to further understand the potential intersections with art education. A broad definition informing this research came from *The Creative Community Builder’s Handbook*, which explains:

The term *creative community building* describes efforts to weave multiple endeavors and professions into the never-ending work of building and rebuilding the social, civic, physical, economic, and spiritual fabrics of communities. Creative community building engages the cultural and creative energies inherent in every person and every place. (Borrup, 2006, p. xv)
The concepts of leveraging the “creative energies” of people and the opportunity to enact social change led to the broad questioning of: What are the “creative energies” that art educators might employ within their specific contexts? These types of questions are well served through PAR as it “is both the medium for change and the method for analysis of the change” (Chevalier & Buckles, 2019, p. 21). This framing of the inquiry created a space to engage with fellow art educators and their perspectives of creative placemaking in their own work and the potential for social change.

PAR offers collaborative approach to engage stakeholders in issues and concepts that are relevant to their own lived experiences (McIntyre, 2008; People’s Knowledge Editorial Collective, 2016; Stringer, 2007). Furthermore, this approach is well aligned to utilizing multiple modes of methods and analysis that are relevant to the PAR team, where “PAR recognizes that we are all able to utilize a range of methodologies to investigate, analyze, reflect on, and come to terms with new knowledge” (People’s Knowledge Editorial Collective, 2016, p. 2). This provided space to support a collaborative study with fellow art educators to engage in narrative and arts-based research approaches to co-generate knowledge about our own practices as art educators as we explored concepts of creative placemaking and creative community building from our own respective sites and work. The centering of local knowledge and experience is well supported in PAR as Stringer (2007) asserts, “Collaborative exploration helps practitioners ... and other stake holding parties to develop increasingly sophisticated understandings of the problems and issues that confront them” (p. 11). This PAR work had emerged from my own professional experiences, a series of pilot interviews with art educators, and literature to further examine the potential intersections of art educator practices and creative placemaking.

**Developing a Pilot Study**

Prior to the pandemic, in the 2018–19 academic year, pilot interviews were conducted with art educators about their individual practices and potential intersections with creative placemaking they found within their work. Practices and tenets of creative placemaking were explored from key texts and scholars within the field of creative placemaking and creative community building (Borrup, 2006, 2016; Markusen & Gadwa, 2010; and Vazquez, 2012). Table 1 addresses strategies, practices, and tenets of success that are identified within the field and promoted as ways to approach creative placemaking.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Creative Placemaking/Creative Community Building</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Strategies, practices, characteristics, tenets, and/or themes identified through literature</td>
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<tr>
<td>Social Development Strategies:</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Promote Interaction in Public Space</td>
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• Increase Civic Participation through Cultural Celebrations
• Engage Youth
• Promote Stewardship of Place
• Broaden Participation in the Civic Agenda (Borrup, 2006, p. 19)

<table>
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<th>innovative vision and drive</th>
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<td>Tailors strategy to distinctive features of place</td>
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<td>Mobilizes public will</td>
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<td>Enjoys support of local arts and cultural leaders</td>
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<tr>
<td>Builds partnerships across sectors, missions, and levels of government (Markusen &amp; Gadwa, 2010, p. 5 &amp; pp. 18–21)</td>
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| Works to make places better meet the social and human needs of its stakeholders. |
| Works to improve the standard of living for all members of the community. |
| Works to build and sustain environments in which the arts—and by extension, creativity—can flourish. |
| Is asset-based. |
| Is place-based, rather than space-based. (Vazquez, 2012, pp. 4–6) |

| Are creative and compassionate creators. |
| Are culturally competent. |
| Intend to guide, but not control, market activity. |
| Recognize that shaping awareness and beliefs is as critical as shaping the built environment. |
| Value, and promote the value of, creative processes and creators. (Borrup, 2016, p. 8) |

Table 1. Strategies, Practices, and Tenets of Success Found in Creative Placemaking Literature

These tenets/strategies became launch points to discuss ideas with art educators and their experiences and perspectives of their work and the field of creative placemaking. During the pilot interviews, educators found that many of the concepts addressed the ways they also conducted creative work within their own respective sites. The pilot interviews provided support to utilize narrative with fellow art educators but lacked a way to document the approaches each educator was identifying regarding their own practices and the changes they were helping engage in their respective sites.

A PAR Question & Grounding in Critical Theory

From the pilot interviews, literature review, and collaboratively working with fellow art educators, the primary research question for this study was: What are potential intersections of specific art educator practices and creative placemaking practices that can be revealed through a PAR study? This question then supported the use of PAR and building a stakeholder team of fellow art educators and exploring their work through narratives and arts-based inquiry methods to collaboratively examine the research question and analyze the findings.

Critical theory is a supporting theoretical frame for this PAR study and the use of this methodology. The support for PAR through critical theory comes from multiple theoretical paradigms such as feminist theory, Marxism, postmodernism, critical pedagogy, and postcolonial critique (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994; Jordan, 2008). By pulling from multiple theoretical paradigms, PAR engages participant collaborators in the ways we can question and critique the social, political, and power dynamics within society and support transformation of those dynamics. Critical theory directly counters the positivist view that knowledge and knowledge construction are divorced from the structures within society (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994; Maguire, 1987/2000) by recognizing the social realities of people and the dynamic and active changes people make towards transforming their social realities. This becomes an epistemological staple in PAR, where
collaborative research supports “knowledge construction to aid people to improve society” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 24). This supported our PAR team to engage in a collaborative process that would allow us to engage our own work and context through questioning.

From November 2020 to March 2021, I worked with three fellow art educators from the United States. The pilot study showcased a gap within the literature to address practitioner voices and their perspectives and work as it intersects with creative placemaking. This PAR study took place during the COVID-19 global pandemic, and thus all collaborative work was conducted using virtual platforms. My three colleagues spanned three areas of the country and worked in three unique spaces as art educators. The team was comprised of a high school art educator from Columbus, Ohio, a museum educator from Washington, D.C., and a teaching and learning manager from Nashville, Tennessee. Our PAR work and approach engaged each participant collaborator to share their own stories, arts-based work, and analysis to address our research question. This study was approved through an IRB process, and all participant collaborators provided verbal consent to engage in this volunteer PAR study about art educator practices.

Vignettes of Each Participant Collaborator

The following sections provide vignettes of each participant collaborator and the narrative and arts-based inquiry we engaged in through this PAR study. The narrative data is presented with portions of dialogue with each participant collaborator’s voice; some sections are bolded to address key points each participant collaborator emphasized in this study. This process is supported in PAR and the connections with narrative inquiry to utilize conversation and storytelling to engage in active action and reflection when reliving the stories (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; McIntyre, 2008; Pushor & Clandinin, 2009). The raw text is meant to hold the iteration and ways of speaking that occurs when in dialogue with one another. Their retelling of stories became a way to share their processes and practices and the changes they were encountering through those processes.

Participant collaborator: Emma

Emma is a high school art educator from Columbus, Ohio. She and I have worked together and collaborated since 2009, when we first met as new teachers in the Columbus City School District. We have worked together on collaborative art projects and were able to support each other when we worked within the same area of Columbus for several years and our students would travel from the elementary site I taught at to the secondary school where Emma taught. When I began this PAR study, Emma was eager to join and share her experiences and work to examine the potential intersections among our work as art educators and the work of creative placemaking.

In response to that question, Emma shared community-focused artmaking she would engage in with her students. One example she shared was something she referred to as The Urn Project, where her students painted large urns to be placed around the community to commemorate the lives of students that had passed away in this part of central Ohio. Figure 1 and 2 showcase images of the urns that were painted by students to make art about their fellow students. When she speaks

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1 Pseudonym
about the project, she recalls the ways it was started and the way her students were happy to engage in this public art making:

So, for, like, the urns for example, somebody brought them to me, and it was just a matter of me being like, Alright, y’all, like, we’re gonna, what are your ideas for this? We’re gonna paint on this thing, and then they’re gonna place it. And so that was like, relatively, the kids really liked it … it was something that was real.

So, they were into it. And, you know, I remembered them just like, I mean, they were big. So, they didn’t have to sit in their seats. You know, it was very physical, like, they were on the table working on like, one section, and another kid was on another section. So, it was like, you know, they, they were into it. And it was, it was, it was enjoyable. For them, it meant something to them. A lot of them knew the kids that, like, the kid that this was kind of in honor of.

(E. Smith, personal communication, November 30th, 2020.)
For Emma, the experiences of building relationships and working with students on authentic artmaking experiences fulfilled many tenets of creative placemaking and exploring what it means to be an artist and art educator in the community she serves. She speaks about the intersections of these practices by saying:

*I think the collaboration is key. And I think that that, for me is like really, kind of the crux of the art practice, is the relationship building with other people. So, for me, that’s what my, like, what I want my work to be about. And that’s what the teaching is about. And that’s what these like projects were able to accomplish. So that’s, I think, why they were takeaway successes, is, um, it was real, it was genuine relationship building with people in the community who I wouldn’t have had any other interaction with, relationship building between me and the students, relationship building between me, the students, and those*
other people, the students and those other people and each other. (E. Smith, personal communication, November 30th, 2020.)

Emma’s narratives and work continued to highlight her focus on engaging students in art making experiences in their community. For her this became a way to build relationships and think about the role educators and students have within school and their own communities. In our one-on-one meetings and our group discussions, Emma would share how she felt her role was to engage students in authentic experiences and that was a connection to creative placemaking, and the relationship people felt with one another and their spaces through art.

**Participant collaborator: Hilary**

Hilary and I met in 2017 when we both were pursuing graduate studies in art education. She is a museum educator, and her research explores critical race theory and critical multiculturalism in museum contexts. She and I formed a friendship and worked as colleagues as we worked and navigated the university setting together. She was a supportive voice when I began this research and continued to collaborate when I shared this PAR study with her to examine our individual practices as art educators and the potential intersections with creative placemaking.

Hilary’s narrative focused on her current role as a museum educator in a mid-size museum in Washington, D.C. She was candid in our dialogues that though creative placemaking was not part of the discourses she engaged within museum spaces, she did share the number of ways the term *community* is enacted and has tensions within her experiences as a museum educator:

> And I think perhaps, **almost that the community word, almost maybe in the end, any of that should be replaced with creative placemaking.** For example, the Phillips, the department I’m in is Education and Community Engagement. **There’s always like these discussions here. You’re always talking about like, what does community mean? Whose community? How are you approaching them? Are they your community? Like, what does this mean?** (H. Katz, personal communication, November 10th, 2020.)

Her focus on community and the ways the term is engaged in her work leads her to share the ways the tensions with the term *community* is a catalyst to help further explore her own practices as a museum educator. She continues to share ways she is examining this in her own work as well as what it means to be in an institution that serves a variety of communities.

As Hilary and I dialogue her work and the ways she sees connections about community and creative placemaking, she shares the various roles she is taking on in a professional capacity. In her own work she shares the ways her role serves educators across Washington, D.C., and how that impacts numerous communities. From here she moves to share how the museum she works for is also engaging in a process of exploring diversity, equity, accessibility, and inclusion (DEAI) work and she is working with a core team to help lead these initiatives and reflect on her work with educators. Hilary shares:

> Basically, we have this first layer of arts integration strategies. And then we’re still developing, through incorporating DEAI with arts integration … basically, how can you create lesson plans … go through that whole process of
teaching through arts integration, while thinking about culturally responsive pedagogy, equitable teaching, diverse learners, diverse backgrounds, all those different things, how can you do … all of that? So, we’re, that's still in development…. We have about 25 lesson plans that I’ve been working on with a curriculum developer to really think about how to integrate the arts. And I think ideally, right, a lot of it is thinking, all of it is kind of approached through this DEAI lens in some ways, which I think is very related to creative placemaking…. So, then we have these lesson plans, and then the course that I teach is all around these strategies. And then the idea, all the teachers in the course, then they use those strategies to teach arts integration lessons in their classroom. Um, so it’s kind of all of that is full circle. (H. Katz, personal communication, November 10th, 2020.)

Her work in curriculum and supporting the museum’s initiatives are all intertwined in her original questioning around the term community and what that means from a pragmatic sense of serving a variety of people and stakeholders in their work.

As we work in our PAR team, Hilary also visually maps her work and explorations though an arts-based reflection of how her work with educators, the role she has in the museum, and the work she hopes to do through an anti-racist lens are all intertwined to engage in change initiatives through her position. Her arts-based work is a way to reflect and share ongoing projects and tensions she sees within her experiences as a museum educator. Figure 3 is Hilary’s visual mapping and arts-based work in responding to the ways she finds intersections among her practice as an art educator and the field of creative placemaking.

Figure 3. Hilary’s arts-based visual mapping of anti-racist work at the museum
Hilary shares how the visual mapping was a way for her to reflect on her work in a more holistic way versus viewing the experiences as discrete and siloed. Her piece provides another variation of how each individual art educator interpreted and took on arts-based inquiry in their own meaningful way for their work and approaches in this PAR study.

Participant collaborator: James

James is an art educator and teaching and learning manager for Crayola. He and I met through a National Art Education Association (NAEA) leadership group we were both selected for in 2017. We have discussed our various professional trajectories and how we have seen similarities and differences in our work as first PreK-12 art educators and then as educators that support fellow educators in another capacity. When James began sharing his narratives about the intersections he found within his work in art education and creative placemaking, he shared stories of work he engaged in with students to create public art for their community.

James focuses his story to share how he was inspired to further engage with community partners as he was teaching middle school and while in graduate school. His graduate work supported his exploration to be a teacher that was finding ways to connect with resources beyond his art classroom. He speaks about this by saying:

Being new to this district and community, I began to forge relationships. I don’t know anyone here and this was a one high school town. And you know, here I am from a big city…. But okay, so I landed, I’m new in this community. While in graduate school, I had been assigned various readings on leadership and partnerships. I’m trying to adopt this leadership mindset in the classroom. And so, I was inspired to forge partnerships in the community with the local solid waste and reduction department of the city government to gain supplies and materials and with the local arts council. (J. Wells, personal communication, December 18th, 2020.)

His passion to connect beyond his own art classroom is a key practice that James continues to share within his story and this PAR study. He speaks about how he sees his community outreach and partnership work connected to his work as a leader. In our conversations he shares, “Yeah. So, you know, in pursuing this graduate work, I began to see, which ultimately ended up being this multimedia thesis project where the title of it was Art Educator as Art Leader. And basically, what I realized was you at the time, I don’t have to be, in some fancy role, like leadership wasn’t a thing I had to, or a position that I had to arrive at” (J. Wells, personal communication, December 18th, 2020). His realization led to a partnership with the local arts council in his community and having his middle school students design banner art that would be put on display in the local main street. In our dialogues, James shares a local newspaper scan he had from the project that highlighted the students’ work and the partnership with the arts council (Figure 4).
Additionally, part of his arts-based inquiry in this PAR study and process was to create a visual memory and sketch of how the story unfolded; he based his sketch on his original work with the students and our dialogues about the ways he found intersections with his practice and the field of creative placemaking (Figure 5).
Summary & Analysis

Over a five-month period, my participant collaborators and I engaged in a PAR study to explore our own practices as art educators and intersections we found among the practices of creative placemaking. The collaborative research team came together in January 2021, and we utilized the time to reflect together over a videoconferencing platform. The act of working together in virtual spaces was an important aspect of conducting research during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic and engaging in a participatory process in our own contexts and our shared identities as art educators across varying sites in the United States. We also analyzed our transcripts, journals, and arts-based artifacts to address the primary research question of our study: What are potential intersections of specific art educator practices and creative placemaking practices that can be revealed through a PAR study?

Our PAR team analyzed our process, the data, and literature to identify emergent themes from this specific research. From a PAR framework, the emergent themes are not meant to be generalizable results but rather opportunities to further engage the research to understand what our specific inquiries and change work explored in a specific time frame.
PAR team findings and discussion

A prominent theme the team explored is the art educator as creative initiator. The PAR team explored the ways each of our narratives, arts-based inquiry, and dialogic work continued to showcase the ways art educators lead creative work and are catalyzers for change within their respective communities and sites. In creative placemaking literature, this thread of leading creative endeavors with communities is recognized as a successful tenet/practice, where “Generally one person or a small team originates a creative placemaking vision. The individuals most responsible for sparking arts development and revitalization efforts come from a surprising range of backgrounds” (Markusen & Gadwa, 2010, p. 18). Our PAR team shared the ways they engage in coordination and logistics to lead their work within their specific contexts and the impact it has with their stakeholders. The team recognized the ways this PAR process supported a reflective space to dialogue and share how and when they were engaging as a creative initiator, whether that was to lead public art with high school students, to lead anti-racist work with fellow museum professionals, or to build community partnerships beyond an art classroom to support students. This prominent emergent theme was also supported in art education literature, which highlights: “Leaders are made through reflective processes, professional development, and experience. Most importantly, leadership is about being a risk taker—eager to stand up and, if failure occurs (which is inevitable), being ready to try again through reflection and education” (Tavin & Ballengee Morris, 2013, p. viii). Through narrative and arts-based inquiry within this PAR study our team discussed the importance of identifying how and when we were engaging as a creative initiator and leading collaborative efforts with our respective communities and stakeholders.

The additional emergent themes that our PAR team addressed in this study are all tied to the first theme of art educator as creative initiator. Additionally, we explored how our narratives and experiences shared the ability to not work in silos, the willingness to experiment, and that we recognized tensions within the field of art education and creative placemaking practices. These additional emergent themes support additional research opportunities as a PAR team and to include additional team members based on the collaborative nature of this study. These themes are directions for the fields of art education and creative placemaking to address intersections that can support the creative practices and experience educators can engage in pedagogy and community development (Borrup, 2006).

The research also led us to discuss the divergences we found within our work and the practices of creative placemaking. These divergences were specific to conducting this research during a pandemic and the social context of this research taking place with art educators in the United States. Our team addressed the ways our research was questioning concepts of community, physical places, and social unrest in relation to our work and roles within art education but also in creative placemaking. Scholars in art education and creative placemaking further support these divergences to address the role the arts can play in maintaining or dismantling hegemony (Denmead, 2019; Markusen & Gadwa Nicodemus, 2019). These divergences are also a point where further research is necessary to interrogate the practices of art educators within their specific contexts.

Using PAR, narrative, and art-based inquiry methods, our collaborative team was able to explore the intersections of creative placemaking with our individual art educator practices. Through our dialogic and arts-based work, the PAR team highlighted their work as creative initiators of projects
within their specific contexts with their stakeholders. Additionally, we recognized tensions that exist within creative community-based work and art education. These emergent themes provide an opportunity to further investigate how educators can lead transformative work within their specific contexts or potentially reify hegemonic practices. Using PAR, narrative, and arts-based inquiry, this study showcases the potential for further study and work with art educators and their expertise and voice in their respective communities.
References


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