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Arts-Based Educational Research

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From the birth of the field of educational research until rather recently, engaging in research has rarely implied an endeavor associated with the arts and humanities. Within the past couple of decades, however, growing numbers of educational scholars and researchers have begun to explore the possibilities of inquiry approaches that are indeed, in varying degrees and ways, artistic in character. These approaches are forms of what has come to be called arts-based educational research (ABER). In this chapter we report on the intellectual yield from those explorations, as we describe the purposes, characteristics, and kinds of ABER. An example of ABER is also included. Readers are forewarned, however: limited space precludes the possibility of a full accounting of this complex form of educational research. For a deeper understanding of ABER readers are urged to consult the references cited throughout this chapter and in the list following its conclusion.

What does it mean to say that an approach to educational research is arts-based? Two criteria apply, each elaborated on in subsequent sections of this chapter. First, arts-based research is engaged in for a purpose often associated with artistic activity: arts-based research is meant to enhance perspectives pertaining to certain human activities. For ABER, those activities are educational in character. Second, arts-based research is defined by the presence of certain aesthetic qualities or *design elements* that infuse the inquiry process and the research “text.” Although these elements are, to some degree, evident in all educational research activity, the more pronounced they are, the more the research may be characterized as arts-based.

The design elements employed in arts-based educational research will, of course, vary according to the art form employed by the researcher. Most existing ABER has employed art forms that are primarily literary in character, such as short stories, educational criticism, literary essays, and (occasionally) theater and poetry. Arts-based research may, in principle, also take the form of nonlinguistic arts, including the plastic and performing arts.

WHY DO ARTS-BASED RESEARCH? A DISTINCTIVE RATIONALE AND PURPOSE

The legitimacy of ABER has been questioned by those who have misunderstood this unique approach to educational inquiry. As for much other educational research, the ultimate goal for

doing ABER is the betterment of educational policy and practice. But on a more fundamental level of research purpose, there exists an important difference between arts-based inquiry and most of the other forms of educational research featured in this book. Educational research has traditionally been conducted for the purpose of arriving at knowledge that is highly valid and reliable, as truthful and trustworthy as possible. Honoring an epistemology that strives toward certainty, traditional research "findings" are meant to explain, predict, and sometimes control the outcomes of similar future events. They enable consumers of the research to argue confidently about how to act.

But ABER is not aimed toward a quest for certainty. Its purpose may instead be described as the *enhancement of perspectives*. If traditionalists generally seek to secure solid explanations and confident predictions, arts-based researchers aim to suggest new ways of viewing educational phenomena. ABER does not offer arguments about how to proceed within the confines of an educational encounter or policymaking episode. Rather than closing off discussion about the presuppositions embodied within a research project, it moves to broaden and deepen ongoing conversation about educational policy and practice by calling attention to seemingly commonsensical, taken-for-granted notions.

Of course, certain nontraditional forms of educational research other than ABER may also strive toward such a research purpose. These contributions often exemplify what is called postmodernist scientific inquiry. However, these research texts often lack certain aesthetic design elements that work toward a powerful transmutation of feelings, thoughts, and images into an aesthetic form. Employing these design elements, ABER at its best is capable of persuading the percipient to see educational phenomena in new ways, and to entertain questions about them that might have otherwise been left unasked.

DESIGN ELEMENTS

How can educational research raise questions rather than find answers? If it is true that form and function are interdependent, then arts-based researchers must skillfully employ design elements that are carefully selected to further that unique research purpose. What are some of these design elements?

To some extent, these elements differ in accordance with the particular art form employed. A variety of artistic media are available to arts-based researchers, including nonverbal ones. But at the time of this writing, most ABER, especially published work, has employed words as the medium of expression. Indeed, our focus here on design elements found in narrative or literary forms of ABER is not due to logocentrism, or a disbelief in the potential usefulness of nonverbal media, or a desire to marginalize nonlinguistic modes of ABER. Rather, it is because this chapter is intended as a report on the current status of the field. Therefore, the aesthetic qualities highlighted next are most often associated with literary forms of art. Among the most prominent aesthetic literary elements employed concern language style and the format of the research text.

Format

The format used in the most traditional research texts tends to be highly standardized. The most conventional might include a statement of the problem and its background, definitions of relevant terms, a review of related literature, a description of methodology and design, a presentation of analysis and findings, and implications for future research. The formats of ABER texts (as with some non-arts-based postmodernist research) tend to be much less conventional. Arts-based researchers often experiment with their research texts, in hopes of designing a format that will achieve the heuristic purposes of enhancing perspectives and raising important educational questions in the minds of

readers. Arts-based textual formats have tended toward the literary or quasi-literary, employing formats associated with, for example, poetry, critical essays, plays, novels, biographies or autobiographies, and collections of life stories. The literary text will sometimes—usually for the purpose of educating readers about the value of the textual experiment—be accompanied by descriptions of (or stories about) the research process, or analysis of themes embodied within it.

Language

Most arts-based inquiry has employed certain rhetorical strategies and devices. Some involve the use of language that may be characterized as (a) evocative, (b) contextual, and (c) vernacular.

Like authors of literature—including storytellers, poets, dramatists, novelists, and even essayists and art critics—arts-based researchers often use language that is evocative. Literary language is designed to stimulate imaginative faculties, inviting the reader to fill gaps in the text with personal meaning. In literature the language choices are expressive and connotative rather than direct and denotative.

This sort of expressive language employs the use of metaphor. Metaphors re-create experience through the forms they take, never signifying a closed, literal meaning, but enabling the reader to experience that which they express. For an example of this sort of nonliteral language, see the work of Sullivan (2000) based on her poetry.

Artistic language may also be characterized as *contextualized*. Arts-based inquirers do not rely primarily on theoretical argot, as scientists and philosophers tend to. Instead, they employ the kind of closely observed descriptions that are prized, not only by novelists, biographers, arts critics, and other literary types, but also by ethnographers. “Thick” literary description grounds the writing in a particular context so that the complexities adhering to a unique event, character, or setting may be adequately rendered.

The language of arts-based researchers is also speech that is directly associated with lived experiences. Theoretical discourse is generally abstract, one step removed from the primary qualities confronted in everyday events. Moreover, theory tends to be fashioned from within a preselected framework, one that is identified with a particular research subcommunity. The grammar and vocabulary of theory are elements of what Toulmin (1953) called the *participant languages* of those who toil in a specialized field. Such language, he argued, is designed quite well for technical purposes. It is highly denotative and conventional, language that participants in a particular field can use with precision to communicate knowledge and information to other participants who have been initiated into that particular specialty area.

Less constrictive of meaning is language that is not as specialized, the sorts of language used in ordinary commerce by lay people (*onlookers*, in Toulmin’s [1953] term). Such language is *vernacular* language. Indeed, many forms of the vernacular may be used by characters inhabiting, for example, a particular school setting portrayed within a piece of arts-based research. The text may be thus characterized as polyphonic, offering an array of vernaculars that reflect a chronotope of personal histories, experiences, and outlooks, none of which is necessarily privileged over the others (Bakhtin, 1981). The use of ordinary, everyday speech in an arts-based research text may serve to attract a different readership than would ordinarily engage in the reading of educational research texts. Audiences for educational research may be thus broadened to include onlookers, such as nonresearcher educational practitioners, educational policymakers, and even members of the general public.

Empathic Understanding and Virtual Realities

The literary format and languages employed are not merely ornamental features of ABER texts. They represent carefully selected and crafted design elements that serve the important and

distinctive heuristic research purpose of this approach to educational research. To raise important educational issues, these texts must enhance perspectives on educational matters that would otherwise not be available to readers. They do this insofar as the literary format and expressive language employed create a virtual world for the reader to inhabit vicariously. This virtual world can be located through the physical realities it evokes. In this kind of research process the author acutely observes and documents telling details of human (educational) activity. Varied perspectives on the meaning of these activities are not merely stated and explained, but, as is the case with good art, expressed and enhanced. See, for example, the portraits of teachers by Intrator (2003), one of which is reprinted at the end of this chapter.

Within a piece of literature the particular, physical realities are recast into a "composed apparition" (Langer, 1957), a virtual whole. Readers of a good story, viewers of a film, audience members of a play may sense that they are moving away from an everyday "real" world and temporarily entering one with which they are less familiar. But they may find that the apparition of the storied world itself becomes a kind of heuristic device that speaks directly to familiar nearby concerns, even as it raises questions about them. Thus, in a short story/essay by Barone (1989), the reader is enticed into the world of an at-risk Appalachian middle school student named Billy Charles Barnett so that questions may be raised about the commonsensical meaning of "at-riskness" as it applies to similar adolescents in other marginalized cultures and in other geographical regions.

Entering this virtual world entails entering a new particular psychological landscape, perhaps viewing it for the first time. This means acquiring an empathic understanding of its inhabitants. Rorty (1989) emphasized the capacity of literature to produce powerful descriptions of the perspectives of certain kinds of people—people with whom it is difficult to feel a sense of solidarity, those looked on as aliens who live, said Rorty, "outside the range of us." For example, the technocratic superstructure of the educational instructions of the school ensures that inhabitants of those institutions—school kids (like Billy Charles), teachers, even administrators—are included in this list of existential foreigners. Following Rorty's view, relating vivid descriptions of their perspectives on the world may reduce alienation among school people and the existential distance between those who live and work in schools and those who do not. Momentarily adopting "foreign" perspectives, consumers of ABER texts may come to question the actual effects of—and so perhaps to rethink—entrenched educational practice and policy.

KINDS OF ARTS-BASED RESEARCH

ABER is an umbrella concept. By an umbrella concept we mean that it prescribes no specific procedure to produce an arts-based research product, but identifies a genre within which there are a variety of approaches. Put simply, ABER can be done in a variety of ways. In this section of this chapter, we identify three kinds of arts-based educational research: genres of narrative construction and storytelling, educational connoisseurship and criticism, and nonliterary forms of arts-based inquiry.

Narrative Construction and Storytelling

One kind of narrative research, called *narrative construction* (Barone, 2001a) or *narrative analysis*, is one in which "researchers collect descriptions of events and happenings and synthesize or configure them by means of a plot into a story or stories" (Polkinghorne, 1995, p. 12).

Interest in storytelling as a form of inquiry first began brewing in fields outside of education. The "narrative turn" in human studies and social science was largely the result of the ascendance of literary theory to a place of prominence in the intellectual world (Booth, 1961, 1979; Kermode, 1967; Polkinghorne, 1988; Ricouer 1990a, 1990b, 1990c; Scholes & Kellogg, 1966). A "literary

turn" in the fields of ethnography and sociology soon had inquirers in those fields characterized as storytellers (Geertz, 1988; Van Maanen, 1988) and poets (Clifford & Marcus, 1986).

The history of the movement toward the construction of stories by educational researchers is, likewise, too rich to fully document here. A truncated version recognizes early advocates of written and oral biographies and autobiographies for the study of educational experiences (Grumet, 1987, 1990; Pinar, 1975, 1980). Stories about the lives of teachers researched and written by university-based scholars soon burgeoned (see Bullough, 1989; Miller, 1990; Ryan, 1970; Yonemura, 1986). And Berk (1980) was among the first educational researchers to reconstruct in story form the life of a student.

But most narrative theorists did not emphasize the traditional formal qualities of storytelling, including the design elements of expressive forms of language and the aesthetic story form mentioned previously. Advocacy of the importance of those features of narrative for educational research text was found in the work of Elliot Eisner. Eisner's vision directly influenced the work of his doctoral students, who experimented with examples of ABER in the 1980s, and subsequently, the larger field of educational research. Especially significant have been the several Winter Institutes on Arts-Based Research, initiated by Eisner, and sponsored by the American Educational Research Association from the mid-1990s through 2003.

As a result of Eisner's efforts and the subsequent work of many others, narrative constructionists have in recent years, with mixed success, employed a variety of literary forms for emplotting their data. These include (among others) poetry (Sullivan, 2000), the novel (Coulter, 2003; Dunlop, 1999; Sellito, 1991), the novella and short story (Kilbourne, 1998; Poetter, 2003), the life story (Barone, 2000, 2001b), the ethnodrama (Saldana & Wolcott, 2001), autobiography and "self-narrative" (Buttignol, 1999), readers theater (Donmoyer & Yennie-Donmoyer, 1995), and even the "sonata form case study" (Sconiers & Rosiek, 2000). Readers are invited to peruse these texts to get a feel for what narrative construction looks like in the context of educational research.

Moreover, many literary-style texts inquiring into educational phenomena have originated from outside the academic community. Barone (2000) discussed how an exclusive view of educational researchers as professional social scientists has, in the past, meant the abandonment of storytelling about school people to noneducationists, especially novelists and journalists. This has slowly begun to change with the acceptance of ABER as a useful and legitimate form of educational research.

Finally, a word about the possibilities of fiction as educational research. Some arts-based educational researchers, as mentioned, have indeed begun to explore the boundaries between fiction and nonfiction in educational research, offering, for example, fictionalized stories as dissertations (de Freitas, 2003; Dunlop, 1999; Saye, 2002). Needless to say, this is an enormously controversial move, and a topic for which we have insufficient space to fully explore here. Let us, however, suggest the following about the relationship between fact and fiction, between, say, a novel and a work of social science.

Clifford Geertz (1973) noted that the etymology of fiction was "fictio." *Fictio* in Latin refers to the process of making. Geertz pointed out that science itself, certainly ethnography itself, is something made. From this perspective, the line between fiction and nonfiction is not as clear as some might believe.

Still, as Sullivan (2000) noted, literary writers are constantly attending to the particulars of experience. Writers of good fiction are highly empirical, insofar as, in their research efforts, they carefully scrutinize the world around them. Indeed, "the basic talent of the novelist," Cook (as cited in Barone, 2000, p. 140) noted, "is to observe social behavior—the way a person furnishes his house or makes love or reacts to death or folds an envelope or constructs his sentences or plans his career."

Of course, the essence of perception is that it is selective. Observations of schools, of classrooms, of teaching are always incomplete—indeed, they must be. Nothing would be more

confusing than a rendering, portrayal, story, play, or poem that tried to describe everything. But selective neglect provides the material for the kind of enhancement of meanings that we have described as the primary research purpose of ABER. Meaning is achieved and enhanced as portions of the world are construed, organized, and disclosed. The document of disclosure—a piece of fictional ABER—may take liberties with the world as it is seen. Composites of individuals might be created to make a point more telling. Emphasis may be added to drive home an idea or to sustain interest. In judging its usefulness as educational research, the question that needs to be asked of such a work is not one pertaining to the mimetic features of the work. It is, rather, whether it illuminates important qualities, raises profound educational questions that would not have been entertained otherwise, and thus elevates the level of discourse about educational matters.

For a fuller discussion of the place of fiction in educational research, readers are referred to the work of Barone (2000, 2001b, 2003) and Pagano (1992).

Educational Connoisseurship and Educational Criticism

Like educational storytelling, a second kind of ABER is also rooted in the arts and humanities. And as with educational storytelling, *educational criticism* honors the heuristic goals and aesthetic design elements outline above (Eisner, 1991). Educational criticism, however, is more closely associated with the field of art criticism than with the construction of stories. The educational critic attempts to disclose elements of educational phenomena in a way that is analogous to the criticism of works of art.

This process of disclosure through writing implies careful perception of educational phenomena, through the practice of what is called *educational connoisseurship*. Put succinctly, connoisseurship is the art of appreciation. Criticism is the art of disclosure. Connoisseurship is developed when an individual has so refined his or her understanding and perception of a domain that the meanings the individual is able to secure are both complex and subtle. Informed by a body of knowledge, they yield what is not obvious. Connoisseurship can be cultivated through experience and through tuition. It is not simply a genetic gift possessed magically by some individuals, although there are differences in aptitude among individuals with respect to their ability to experience particular forms of complexity in a domain.

Educational criticism is the process through which the qualities, meanings, and significance of some situation or object are made visible through the activities of the educational critic. The aim of criticism, wrote Dewey (1934), is the reeducation of the perception of the work of art. The critic serves as a kind of midwife to perception. He or she promotes awareness by building a bridge between the work and what the individual needs to understand the meaning and significance of what is going on. Good educational critics talk or write about works in illuminating ways.

Educational criticism has four dimensions, described here independently, but which in practice can be combined. The first of these is description. The educational critic is concerned with making vivid what he or she experiences. To do this, literary forms of language and other expressive devices are employed to reveal what might not be apparent. Metaphor and simile are often a part of that language. Unlike traditional modes of description, propositions may be least appropriate for characterizing certain aspects of a situation.

A second feature of educational criticism is that it is interpretive. The educational critic not only gives an account of but also tries to account for what he or she has described. Why does it occur? What is its significance? How does it function? Questions like these deal with matters of interpretation. Interpretive material tries to penetrate the surface and get at deeper issues and meanings. This can require the use of theory from the social sciences to help explicate what has been made visible.

A third feature of educational criticism is that it is evaluative. Education is, after all, a normative enterprise. It aims at doing some good. The need, therefore, to determine the merits of what one is attending to, whether a new textbook offered for adoption, a form of teaching, a set of classroom norms that have been employed in a particular school. Such material needs to be looked at with a sense of appraisal and not only as an object of description. Ultimately, the question is, "Is the educational life of the students being enhanced by what is being provided?" That large general question provides a frame for evaluation.

Finally, educational criticism often (although not always) culminates with thematics. By thematics we mean that a large idea or ideas are derived from what has been attended to. In the particular resides the general and one of the functions of an educational critic is to locate what is general in what is particular. What does the reader come away with that applies to situations outside of the one that was studied?

Examples of ABER that may be classified as educational criticism include works by Barone (1983), McCutcheon (1976), and Vallance (1977). However, because of the tendency to blur genres (Geertz, 1988), it is often difficult to classify ABER within distinct categories. For example, educational criticism exhibits many features similar to those found in what Lawrence-Lightfoot has labeled the *art and science of portraiture* (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1983; Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). It is true that the antecedents of, and rationale for, educational criticism are more exclusively and directly derived from the field of art criticism than is portraiture. But is, for example, Donmoyer's (1983) portrait of a high school principal an educational biography, literary case study, educational criticism, or all of these?

Nonlinguistic Forms of Educational Research

Arts-based educational researchers are, more recently, experimenting with nonlinguistic forms of the arts for alternative modes of representing research data. These art forms may include, among others, painting, photography, collage, music, video, sculpture, film, and even dance. A few examples of ABER employing species of the plastic and performing arts have found their way into traditional venues, such as print journals, dissertations and theses (Springgay, 2001), and books (Bagley & Cancienne, 2002; Diamond & Mullen, 1999; Mirochnik & Sherman, 2002). Up to now, however, ABER exhibits and performances involving these art forms have generally been confined to sessions at professional conferences and are (for reasons obvious and not so) rarely published in books and journals. This may change with the advent of electronic journals and CDs with the capacity for communicating through a wide variety of modalities.

Still, these nonlinguistic kinds of ABER may present the greatest challenge to those research traditionalists for whom the written word has been the solely sanctioned means of communicating research findings. Moreover, just as with literary forms of ABER, there exists the danger that many educational researchers, educational practitioners, and lay people may be mystified (and perhaps alienated) by subtle and complex works of the plastic and performance arts designed to express research findings. Nevertheless, arts-based educational researchers who are cognitive pluralists may rightly argue that each artistic modality represents a unique means for enhancing the educational perspectives of audience members by successfully communicating the ineffable dimensions of experiences within schools.

SOME CRITERIA FOR APPRAISING ARTS-BASED RESEARCH

As we have indicated, arts-based research is an orientation to the conduct of educational research that, in a sense, plays by rules that differ from those applied to more conventional educational

research. Nevertheless, while the assessment criteria may differ, ABER can, and we be ought, to be judged by its consequences. As suggested previously, a good piece of ABE designed to enhance meanings, to broaden and deepen ongoing conversations about educational policy and practice. Here we expand on this broad statement about the educational quality of ABER, naming four more specific consequences that we deem important.

First, the merits of the research are to be judged by its *illuminating effect*—its ability to reveal what had not been noticed. One of the fundamental aims of ABER is to make vividly subtle but significant so that awareness of the educational world that the research addresses is increased. Arts-based research, in this sense, culminates in work that is *referentially adequate*. By referentially adequate we mean that it enables the reader to notice what the research through his or her work claims to be there. The term “claims” is a problematic one. Awareness can be promoted through the presence of a constellation of factors, that is to say, an artistic image. We in no way want to restrict the term “claims” to propositions that are asserted. Assertions, propositions, a defining outcome of traditional forms of scientific research, do not exhaust the means through which appraisal can take place. In judging a piece of ABER one might inquire whether the work sheds light on the phenomena explored, and inquire about the grounds for believing that it does or does not.

Second, the research should be judged also by its *generativity*—its ability to promote new questions. One of the most important functions of ABER is that it raises more questions than answers. The kinds of questions or puzzlements that a reader or viewer of such research comes away with is a critical criterion for assessing its value.

A third feature that can be used to appraise arts-based research is its *incisiveness*; that is, its ability to focus tightly on educationally salient issues and questions. Does the research address what is educationally significant in a school, a classroom, or the lives of school people? Does the matter get to the heart of the matter, persuading readers of the educational importance of events portrayed?

Another feature of arts-based research is its *generalizability*; that is, its relevance to phenomena outside of the research text. Does the research text have legs? Does it enable the reader to make connections that had not been made before? For example, when Philip Jackson (1968) described what he calls “the daily grind” in elementary schools, one gets a sense almost immediately of the generalizability of this observation. The daily grind is a way of describing a routine that is not limited to any particular classroom but is, from our experience and from others’, rather common in most elementary schools. This is an example of the relevance of Jackson’s observations to classrooms other than the one that he studied.

Once again, the foregoing features require the use of judgment to determine their presence. They cannot be applied as formulaic criteria. They are features that exist in various degrees in arts-based research. All of the features described need not be present for a research effort to be regarded as a species of arts-based research.

Whether these criteria are met or not, the usefulness of a particular project will depend not only on the perceptiveness of the researcher and on his or her skills and talents in crafting the research text or product. Talent is indeed required for employing the design elements toward the heuristic ends of ABER. But competence is also required of those who are the judges of a piece of ABER. Competence refers to a level of discernment that not all individuals possess: The appreciation of great (or merely good) works of art requires great (or good) audiences. No less is true for ABER (or, we would suggest for research of a scientific character.)

This judgment about the quality of a piece of ABER is complicated by the fact that its intended audience may include more than the usual critical community of scholars. This community is defined by social and intellectual networks, by meetings of learned societies, by books, and by

academic journals to which members of the field subscribe. If a piece of ABER is indeed intended for such a venue and audience, then members of this exclusive community assume the responsibility for making judgments about submitted articles that are examples of ABER, using criteria such as those suggested here. If, however, an arts-based educational research text is aimed at an expanded audience that includes educational practitioners and even lay people, then these consumers of the work also become part of the expanded critical community. Thus, you, the readers (scholars, students of education, or otherwise "onlookers") of the following example of arts-based research by Sam Intrator, are also invited to ponder the degree to which the work is illuminating, generative, incisive, and relevant to your own educational world.

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APPENDIX

AN EXAMPLE OF ARTS-BASED EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH

A brief excerpt from Sam Intrators' (2003) *Tuned in and fired up: How teaching can inspire real learning in the classroom*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press.

Today, a respite from the spring torrents has buoyed the collective spirit of the class, and they tumble in from the hallway less sodden and friskier than usual. On days like this, the size of the room seems absurd for thirty-two adolescents and one adult.

Mr. Quinn squeezes by my corner hideaway, throws a grin my way, and pantomimes sweeping sweat off his brow. "Whew, praise to the sun"; he intones. Today's lesson addresses John Steinbeck's ability to transform the ordinary detail into a resonant-signifier. Mr. Quinn had neither taught Cannery Row nor read it before beginning this unit. This meant that he was simultaneously reading the book and designing the activities. In conversation with me he said, "I don't know if I would love this book if I were reading it as a junior in high school, but what I do want to convey to students is how brilliantly Steinbeck celebrates the ordinary in his writing."

An accomplished writer himself, Mr. Quinn marveled at Steinbeck's prose. "It's astonishing what Steinbeck does with the details of Monterey. While I was in the Peace Corps, Lisa [his wife] was in Korea and I was in Algeria. We wrote all the time, trying to share the details and capture the little nuances of our daily life. It's a profound challenge for a writer to evoke the living quality of a place. Steinbeck does that in ways that make your jaw swing open."

Mr. Quinn consistently shared his reverence with the students. On the day he distributed copies of Cannery Row, he began by saying, "O.K., wait until you hear this. Everybody open to page one and just sit and listen." He then read: "Cannery Row in Monterey in California is a poem, a stink, a grating noise, a quality of light, a tone, a habit, a nostalgia, a dream. Cannery Row is the gathered and scattered, tin and iron and rust and splintered wood, chipped pavement and weedy lots and junk heaps, sardine canneries of corrugated iron, honky tonks, restaurants and whore house, and little crowded groceries and laboratories and flophouses." He concluded his reading, clearly in awe: "How does a place become a poem, and how does one make a place a poem?"

Silence follows his question, and then with adolescent irreverence, Joseph calls out, "Whoah, deep, Mr. Quinn." The class titters at Mr. Quinn's expense, and he encourages the good cheer by throwing back his head in the manner of a cosmoically inclined flower child and playfully saying, "Like, it would be groovy if you could show me the light?"

Once the class settles, Mr. Quinn begins again, "Today we're going to spend some more time thinking about Cannery Row. I'd like to follow up on yesterday's lesson, which I thought, as a teacher, was interesting for a lot of reasons. I was ready for a lot more than what happened. I had planned for us to think about how Steinbeck crafts words and description, and while I appreciate those people who commented, to be honest, I felt slightly unsatisfied with both myself and with what we did together. And today, I'd like to come at this idea a little differently."

Mr. Quinn's candor draws students towards him. One day, for example, he apologized for being slightly unprepared, and I asked a student how that felt. "I've never had a teacher who apologized for anything. That's one of the things that makes me like him. He's real, a real person, unlike some other teachers who are good at criticizing us but who would never say anything like that about themselves."

Mr. Quinn rubs his hands together like a fiendish scientist, which gets a chuckle from the class. He tells them, "But given yesterday's uneasiness, I've got something special planned for today. Instead of languishing in here amid the desks and chairs, we're going out to the baseball field to write." He passes out the assignment and reads: "You must find a place anywhere on the grass in the baseball field or Washington Park and sit there for the period and write about what you see in your immediate domain (e.g., within a two-foot circumference around you). This will be due at the period's end. You should focus on description, on showing what you see. The purpose is to think like Steinbeck or Doc, who both want to see the world in all its magnificence, no matter how small. What biologists do is make observations with no judgment. They simply look at the world really closely. They look very, very carefully. Sometimes we think we see, but we don't." Mr. Quinn pauses for emphasis. He then gives the rest of the directions.

So when I send you out you may say, "Look, I'm sitting on a two-foot area of grass. It's all green and all the same shape. Big deal, you may say." But that's not what a biologist would say. They would look at individual blades of grass. They would look at the patterns. They look to see if some were chewed down. Are some of them incomplete? Are some of them just punching through the grass? What are the patterns that emerge from studying the grass? Dig down between the grass and see what types of things can be found there. How do the daisies grow? Are they all the same? What patterns do you have? So take a piece of paper. I'll collect them at the end of the period. We're going to head out to the baseball field, and we're going to find a piece of ground.

You need to sit apart from everybody else, and you really need to find your own space. I want people 10 or 15 feet from each other. We have a whole baseball field; there's plenty of room.

Mr. Quinn sounds like he's giving an inspirational speech. He's excited about the prospects of this lesson. He and the kids have been feeling "locked up and locked down because of the rain." He wants the students to think outside the box, because they're not responding to Steinbeck in the way he hoped.

Mr. Quinn's right. There's been active and almost hostile resistance to the book thus far. From my seat in the back of the room, I've heard a steady stream of complaints about the book, from "This book sucks," to "Can Cannery Row."

Mr. Quinn puts on his sunglasses with a flourish, and points his finger toward the door. His intensity resembles that of a football coach leading his players out onto the field before a big game. "Let's go!" Arnie shoots his hand up, "Yo, Mr. Quinn, Yo, Mr. Quinn." "Yes, Mr. Alum?" "Do we have to sit on the grass?" Arnie asks, sliding his fingers down the stiletto-sharp crease on his white jeans.

Mr. Quinn grins and says, "You don't have to sit on the grass ... but you need to stay still and find a place ... and you need to follow the directions as they're outlined on the sheet."

Once Mr. Quinn heads down the hall, the class dissolves. Julia digs through the recycling bin and comes up with a piece of cardboard to sit on. Travis takes his soccer ball out of his bag. "Writing my ass," he says, and bounces the ball off Emile's head. Joseph pulls out this month's *Car and Driver*, rolls it up and slips it into the pocket of his oversized jeans. "What's he thinking now?" he says with exasperation. "No way I'm sitting on grass." Susanne rolls her eyes. "What are we gonna do on the baseball field? Write what? I hate this book anyway." Kobey grins, "Hey, it's better than sitting here all day." Joseph jokes to the stragglers in the room: "Now boys and girls, just go out to the field and write about the grass. Be one with the grass." He clasps his hands together and bows his head in the manner of a pious monk. I ask Emile what he thinks Mr. Quinn's got planned. "I think he wants us to look at things carefully. We're going to try and be writer-scientists. I don't know. This is kinda strange."

Out on the field, Mr. Quinn says, "Try and give yourself some room. This is an individual exercise. Randy, if you can, tear yourself away from Lilia. Travis, stay in the outfield."

Reluctantly the students distribute themselves across the manicured field. As Mr. Quinn surveys the field I can see him becoming impatient with their antsiness. His voice bristles. "Craig. Do not, do not, sit next to somebody."

Craig looks over and says, "Sorry, Mr. Quinn."

"What are we supposed to do?" asks Linda. Her head's thrown back, and her shirt is rolled up past her midriff. "Write what?" she asks.

"OK, folks, come on, says Mr. Quinn. "I've asked you to stake out a one-by-one piece of field and treat it the same way that Steinbeck treated Monterey. Write about whatever you see in your immediate environment. Just write."

Vincent sits down heavily and leans back against one of the stately trees that line the field. "Hey, anybody know if this is a spruce tree?" Arnie calls over to Mr. Quinn: "Is it O.K. if I write about something other than the grass?" Dave answers, "Shhh, shut your fucking mouth!" Arnie laughs, and Dave says, "I'm gonna kick your ass if you ask one more question and interrupt the forty minutes of sleep I'm planning on getting." He jams the brim of his hat down over his nose and lies still except for a blade of grass bobbing about in his mouth.

Arnie solves the grass-stain dilemma by returning to the class and lugging a chair out. "I don't do grass," he says regally. Other students look like they're getting comfortable and enjoying the sun.

"Would you guys stop already! C'mon, I can't write with all this noise," says Lilia. "Yeah, cut the shit," says Randy emphatically. "You're messing with my creative flavor." Now that the class is working, Mr. Quinn sits down on the edge of the outfield begins his own writing. I, too, sit down and turn to my notebook.

The sun seems to have cooked the cranky edge off the group. They look relaxed splayed out across the field, but they're writing with intensity. Lilia's sitting on her knees with her nose buried in the grass. Joseph studies the spruce tree, his hand caressing the bark. Susanne's lying on her back, eyes dosed, soaking in the sun, and then she jumps up and begins scrawling away in her book. She walked out to the field as if it were an outdoor latrine; now she looks beset by the muse. Mary's shoes are off, and her toes are wiggling around the grass. A raspy fence rattles, and the field caretaker pushes a wheelbarrow and chalk liner out onto the field. He looks around quizzically, perhaps searching for an adult. He begins to push the wheelbarrow toward first base, but stops and shakes his head. He leaves the wheelbarrow standing between home and first and heads back off the field.

The class writes for twenty-five minutes, which was the longest uninterrupted parcel of writing I witnessed all year. As I look out across the diamond, I'm reminded of a phrase I once heard used to describe Graig Nettles, the sensational, panther-like third basemen of the New York Yankees during the 1970s. A radio announcer said, "He just sits there relaxed and alert at the same time." I've rarely seen this combination of serenity and attentiveness at work in schools.