

The Sage Encyclopedia of Qualitative Research Methods

A/r/tography

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A/r/tography is an arts and education practice-based methodology recognizing that the practices of artists and educators are often reflective, reflexive, recursive, and responsive acts of living inquiry. This entry describes these practices in broadly conceptualized forms of inquiry that can be used by scholars, artists, educators, and students.

A/r/tography as a Form of Inquiry

A/r/tography resides in the practices of artists and educators whose forms of inquiry are similar to an understanding of action research that does not follow a prescribed plan or method but rather pursues an ongoing inquiry committed to continuously asking questions, enacting interventions, gathering information, and analyzing that information before asking further questions and enacting more living inquiry. Although these acts might seem to be linear, they are usually intertwined acts of meditative, even contemplative, inquiry. The creative and artistic inquiry practices of poets, dancers, musicians, performers, visual artists, and other artists resonate with these educative acts of inquiry and also inform *a/r/tographical* practice. *A/r/tographers* envision artistic and educational practices as enacting dispositions to knowledge creation as they begin to appreciate how inquiry is a commitment to understanding through acts of theorizing. The practices of artists and educators are situated within complex environments. Inquiring in these contexts requires a commitment to an evolution of questions within the living inquiry processes of practitioners. For *a/r/tographers*, this means an ongoing quest for understanding that is timely, emergent, generative, and responsive for those involved. After all, artists seek challenges that interrupt taken-for-granted ways of knowing so as to see, hear, and experience the world differently. In this way, *a/r/tographical* practices are not comfortable habits but rather the challenging practices of learning to question differences and perceive differently in and through time. *A/r/tographers* understand that who they are is embedded in what they know and do. Theory and practice are no longer divided but rather folded together through lived experiences and lived inquiry.

Methodological Practices of A/r/tography

A/r/tography is different from many other research methodologies that identify specific research problems to be solved through methodological protocols that lead to specific research findings. A/r/tographical inquiry may identify foreshadowed problems, but the intention is to engage in inquiry over time so as to come to deeper understandings of the issues that have been raised. Graeme Sullivan addresses this idea by moving away from the language of probability and plausibility to possibility. A/r/tographers are committed to artistic forms of engagement that help them to create, interpret, and/or represent new forms of knowledge. Knowing (*theoria*), doing (*praxis*), and making (*poiesis*) are folded together in a/r/tography to form rhizomatic ways of experiencing the world and creating the circumstances to produce knowledge and understanding through inquiry-laden processes. Furthermore, knowledge is always in a state of becoming, meaning that there is a need to be continuously committed to inquiry over time.

A/r/tography involves self-inquiry and collective inquiry. Artists and educators recognize that relationality permeates our existence. The work of Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Jean Luc Nancy underscored this concept by maintaining that meaning is constituted between beings. According to Nancy, this betweenness is both unity and uniqueness, the singular plural of being. Each identity is created through encounters with others, and it is the *with* that demonstrates the contiguity and distinctiveness of each entity. The relations between these entities and other entities show how the in-betweenness can metaphorically be conceived as a fold. In a fold, the material is simultaneously exterior and interior with no sides. Gilles Deleuze translated un/folding as dividing endlessly—folds within folds existing side by side. Un/folding performs in the in-between spaces, and in a/r/tography relational inquiring is un/folded between the identities and forms of engagement for the artist/researcher/teacher.

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Artists, researchers, and educators do not work in isolation. Their work is related to the work of others. A/r/tographers acknowledge the work of others either by attending performances and exhibitions or by citing artists, educators, and researchers in their written work. Furthermore, a/r/tographers are not limited to academic circles. They can

be practicing artists, teachers, learners, and students. Although a/r/tography privileges the identities of artists, researchers, and teachers (a/r/t), it should be noted that these identities are broadly conceptualized. For instance, rather than saying *teacher*, it may be better to say *teacher/learner* so that the teaching and learning enterprise is embraced. Just as a/r/tography challenges habits of knowing, it challenges boundaries that are placed on the identities of artists, researchers, and teachers. In so doing, a/r/tographers also challenge the institutional boundaries often associated with these identities. Artist/researcher/teacher identities exist in a contiguous relationship with one another. In communities of a/r/tographers, one might find separate communities of artists and educators, but it is more likely that hybrid communities of artists, educators, and researchers have been created.

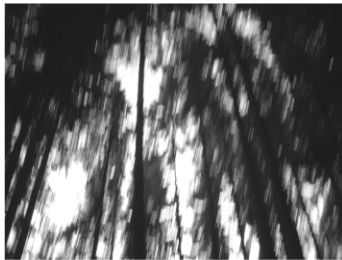
Concepts and Conditions of A/r/tographical Inquiry

A/r/tographers look to Mieke Bal's contention that interdisciplinarity needs to find its basis in concepts rather than methods. Concepts are flexible intersubjective locations for enhanced understanding. The conditions for these concepts are relational forms of inquiry. How does a/r/tography fit within a qualitative methodology? A/r/tographers can use any method commonly used by qualitative researchers such as interviews, observations, and reflective note taking, but what is more important is that a/r/tographers understand that concepts direct inquiry, whereas methods are strategies for gathering information. To emphasize the conceptual nature of a/r/tography, concepts are referred to as *renderings*. Thus, a/r/tographers need to consider the conditions (relational forms of inquiry) and the concepts (renderings) that help them to conduct their living inquiry.

A/r/tographical work may be rendered through the methodological concepts of contiguity, living inquiry, openings, metaphor/metonymy, reverberations, and excess that are enacted when a condition of relational inquiry becomes the site for working with the arts and text while practicing the broadly conceived identities of artist/researcher/teacher. A/r/tography is necessarily about self. Yet so too can communities of a/r/tographers share inquiries, be critical friends, and work collectively to interpret, create,

or represent their evocative/provocative works to others. A/r/tography is certainly about inquiry, yet inquiry also involves the presentation of new understandings (rather than findings) from time to time. Renderings help to conceptualize the processes and products within the inquiry. Moreover, renderings are not procedures but may be conceived as performative concepts of possibility. The first, contiguity, represents the coming together of the arts and graphy (writing) as well as the coming together of the identities and practices of artists/researchers/teachers. Contiguity makes visible the spaces in between these practices and identities as well as the relationships these spaces inspire. The dialectical in/between spaces are dynamic living spaces of inquiry where entities touch and then shift yet lie close together. In this space, inquiry becomes open to challenges, discomfort, and surprise.

Rita L. Irwin's A/r/tography, 2006



In this photograph, I have blurred the environment to see it anew. Metaphorically, this affords me an opportunity to blur other areas of inquiry (e.g., teaching, learning) that lead to new insights and perceptions. In a/r/tography, artists/teachers engage in ongoing inquiry around particular issues or curiosities through their art forms and pedagogies and, as a result, use their ongoing inquiry to pursue change in their practices.

Source: Digital photograph, 2006, by Rita L. Irwin.

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Artists, researchers, and teachers engaged in a/r/tography are living lives of inquiry where conclusions are seldom found but searching and researching continue despite the unpredictable. Living inquiry is the second rendering. In a/r/tography, visual, written, and performative processes are enacted as a living practice of art making, researching, and teaching. Living inquiry is an embodied encounter constituted through artistic and textual understandings and experiences that may or may not include representations.

Living inquiry lingers in the liminal spaces among *a* (artist), and *r* (researcher), and *t* (teacher) and often arises out of everyday life. As such, the emotional, intuitive, spiritual, bodied, and cognitive ways of knowing are accessed through experiences engaged during living inquiry. Artistic and textual renderings of living inquiry may also expose contradictions and assumptions that lead to evocative or provocative *a/r/tographic* accounts.

Living inquiry is a fluid orientation finding its rigor through continuous reflexivity and analysis. Some individuals are interested in *a/r/tography* while believing that they do not need to be skilled as artists. On the contrary, *a/r/tographers* need to be committed to being the best possible educators and artists they can be. *A/r/tography* should not be chosen simply as a vehicle for artistic representation through research dissemination; rather, it should be chosen as a way of being in the world. Living inquiry encourages one to experience and question the world from different perspectives and to slow down and notice that which is around one. In a photograph, one can blur the environment to see it anew. Metaphorically, this affords one an opportunity to blur other areas of inquiry (e.g., teaching, learning) that lead to new insights and perceptions.

The third rendering encompasses metaphor/metonymy. Through metaphors and metonymic relationships, we render experiences understandable. Metaphors and metonyms allow insight yet ambiguity of meaning. The forward slash between them allows division and doubling, a reverberation between the two that makes them relational and active. Moreover, meaning un/does itself in that there is often a loss of meaning and deeper insights. The fourth rendering is openings. *A/r/tography* is both active and responsive—open to what is seen and known and to what is not seen and not known. Cracks, tears, holes, losses, invitations, and encounters can represent openings. Inquiry that opens up conversations creates spaces where relationships can reverberate with meaning. This brings us to the fifth rendering. Reverberations call attention to the movement that shifts meanings. These movements allow meaning-making to be created at deeper levels, across time, and/or with others. An entanglement of meaning often happens in social networks where we push and pull apart meanings in the company of others. The last rendering is excess where we create to become, where we examine our fears and desires, and where we renegotiate the everyday. Excess can represent waste and the sublime, the awful and the incredible. Excess provides opportunities for complexity by questioning our very being and becoming.

Renderings are dynamic and intersubjective concepts. A/r/tographers engage in conditions of aesthetic inquiry to explore possibilities for creating meaning by performing their living inquiry through the contiguous acts of art making and writing, where ideas metaphorically and/or metonymically reverberate in excess and openings. Renderings are often enacted through rhizomatic assemblages where meanings and understandings are interrogated and ruptured. As a result, a/r/tography transforms the idea of theory as an abstract system distinct and separate from practice to become theory as practice, an embodied living space of inquiry.

In closing, a/r/tography allows artistic and educational practices to inform, contradict, and complement one another. As a/r/tography is used more widely, other renderings (concepts) and relational forms of inquiry (conditions) may be interpreted, thereby transforming a/r/tography through practice. Recently, scholars in architecture, health care, and the humanities have been exploring how the a/r/tographic practices of artists and educators can enhance their inquiry. These interdisciplinary spaces concentrate on the conditions and concepts for inquiry rather than on the primary disciplines and are pushing the boundaries of inquiry in the academy. A/r/tography as a creative and educative form of living inquiry will transform over time as the arts and education transform in and through time.

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See also

- [Arts-Based Research](#)
- [Arts-Informed Research](#)
- [Narrative Inquiry](#)

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