



# The Possibilities of Research— The Promise of Practice

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**T**he NAEA Strategic Vision (2015-2020)<sup>1</sup> affirms that “students of all ages benefit from comprehensive, balanced, and sequential learning in the visual arts, led and taught by qualified teachers who are certified in art education” (2016, p. 2). **Art educators will readily agree that art is a crucial part of learning for all students. Yet, how might we support this claim?** NAEA asserts it is through “research” that we create knowledge to justify why art is important and necessary in our educational lives. Furthermore, when knowledge from research is shared it “enriches and expands visual arts education” (NAEA, 2016, p. 6).

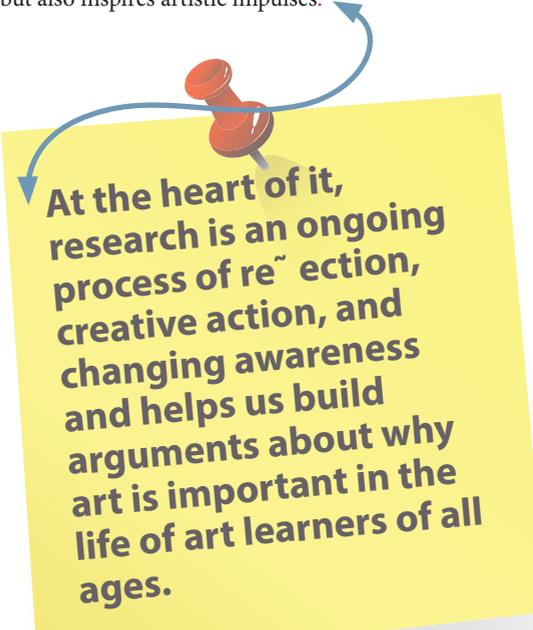
**But, what is research, who does it, and how do we use it?**

## This is how the NAEA Research Commission describes research:

Curiosity and the impulse to explore and understand the complex world we inhabit motivate the search for new knowledge. Systematic and imaginative inquiries inspire reflection, raise questions, confront issues, and investigate problems—these are processes of research. To make sense of changing cultures, societies and settings, researchers devise, adopt, and adapt methods and technologies to create new knowledge that improves our understanding of human experience. Outcomes of research can yield new insights and awareness. When communicated widely, these outcomes offer individuals and communities new opportunities, ideas, and possibilities for enacting change. (NAEA, Research Commission Research Vision Statement, 2012, n.p.)<sup>2</sup>

A basic expectation is that research produces new knowledge that we apply to improve what we do in our classrooms and studios. The action of gathering and sharing information and making decisions about what to do is a process of research that is continually expanding as we make sense of the ever-changing worlds we inhabit. **However, we also draw on personal knowledge and life experience to inform our teaching**—a° er all we have been using our imagination and intuition to make an impact on the life of art learners for a long time.

As we create and share new information from our own discoveries and from those of others, we change how we think and act as artists and educators. **Understanding new possibilities means that what we know is constantly being challenged by doubts about what we don't know.** This is what e° ective research does, it helps us see that uncertainty and curiosity not only motivate new inquiries, but also inspires artistic impulses.



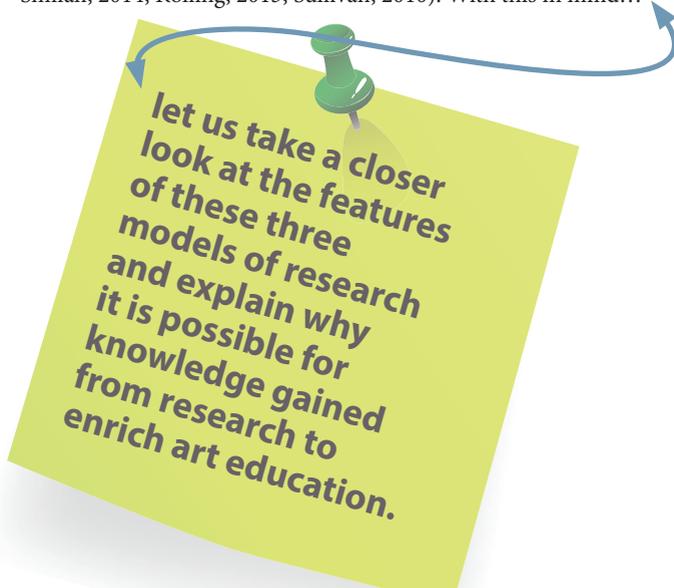
At the heart of it, research is an ongoing process of re° ection, creative action, and changing awareness and helps us build arguments about why art is important in the life of art learners of all ages.

## The Possibilities of Research

Art educators draw upon many sources of ideas, knowledge, and theories in establishing e° ective classroom and studio practices. However, there are three main research traditions that in° uence what we do as educators in our pursuit to excite others about art. **The three models of research most prominent in educational practice today are human science research, arts and culture research, and practitioner research.**

In a nutshell, human science research systematically gathers information by studying the behavior of students and educators and identifying means of intervening and improving everyone's performance, thus ensuring adequate progress is made. Arts and culture research, on the other hand, draws inspiration from the life of individuals, communities and cultures and constructs methods of responding meaningfully to important issues. **The basic premise of practitioner researcher is that the most important and e° ective knowledge is self-knowledge, which is built around re° ection, actions and making practices because these inform and transform our understanding of how we respond to everyday change.**

In this paper we sketch out some of these continually evolving research practices by comparing and contrasting research models that have had di° erent degrees of in° uence in the yeld of art education. Human science research, with its foundation yrmly based in the sciences, is by far the most dominant model of research in° uencing what happens in our schools today. However, in addressing the question of which approach to research is the most e° ective, we argue that it is knowledge about educational purposes and practices found in art, culture, and communities made by artist and teacher practitioners that have the most impact (Barrett, 2008; Hetland, Winner, Veenema & Sheridan, 2013; Marshall & Donahue, 2014; Sweeny, 2010). We also support arguments that expand the role art educators and artists have to play in undertaking research themselves as a means of improving educational practices (Bu° ngton & Wilson McKay, 2013; Irwin & de Crosson, 2004; Jagodzinski & Wallin, 2013; Marzilli Miraglia & Smilan, 2014; Rolling, 2013; Sullivan, 2010). With this in mind...



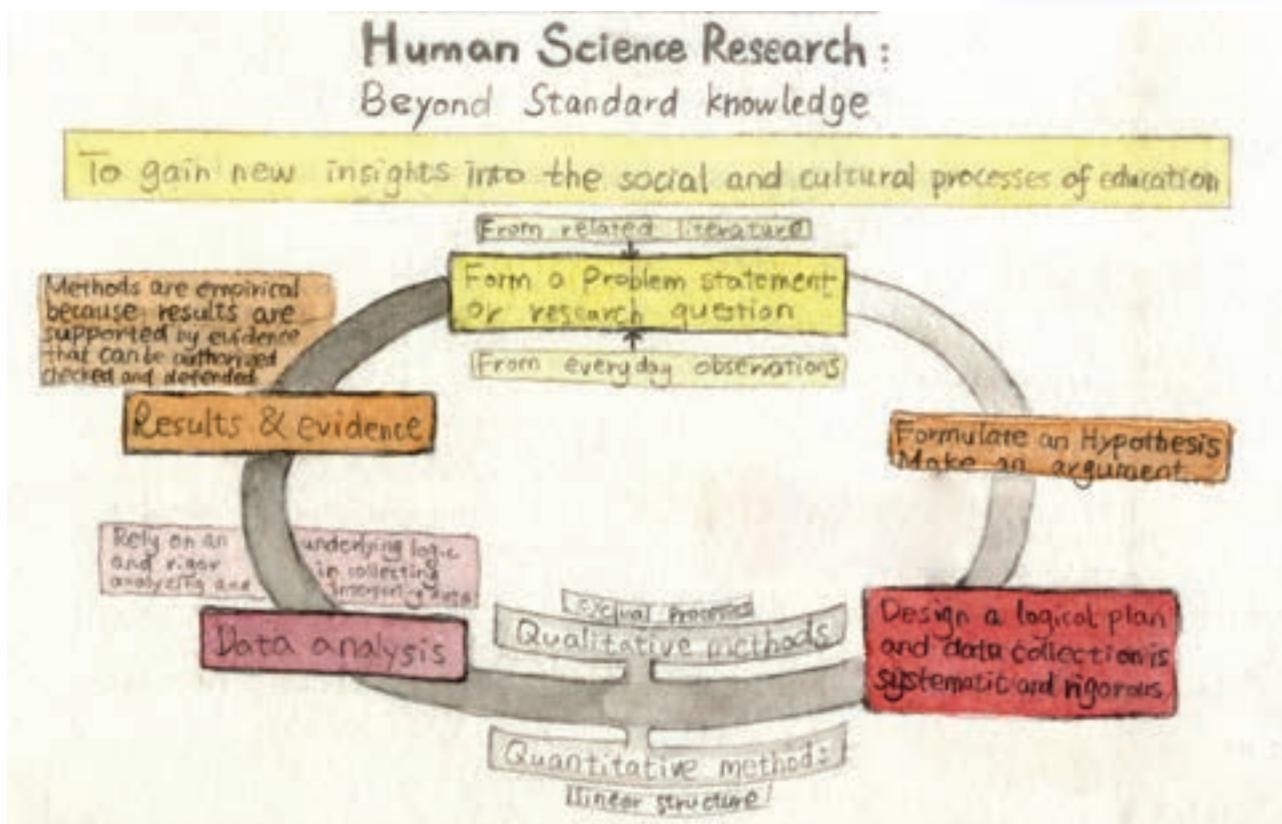
Let us take a closer look at the features of these three models of research and explain why it is possible for knowledge gained from research to enrich art education.

## ■ ■ ■ ■ Human Science Research: *Beyond Standard Knowledge*

Human science educational research is the most common approach used to study individuals, groups, communities, and institutions to gain new insights into the social and cultural processes of education. A primary goal is to add to new information to what currently exists by developing methods for improving teaching, assessing learning, and establishing efficient means to design and deliver educational programs. Human science research studies yield outcomes expressed as quantitative measures, rich descriptive accounts, grounded observations, and other ways **to show results that are communicated in standard forms.** These research approaches are described as “empirical” because the results are supported by evidence that can be confirmed, compared, and defended.

**The design of a human science research study is a logical plan** that includes addressing a research problem, or defining an hypothesis or research questions, comparing the issue to what we know already from the literature, designing methods for gathering the information we need, and using standard procedures to examine it.

... “empirical” because the results are supported by evidence that can be confirmed, compared, and defended.



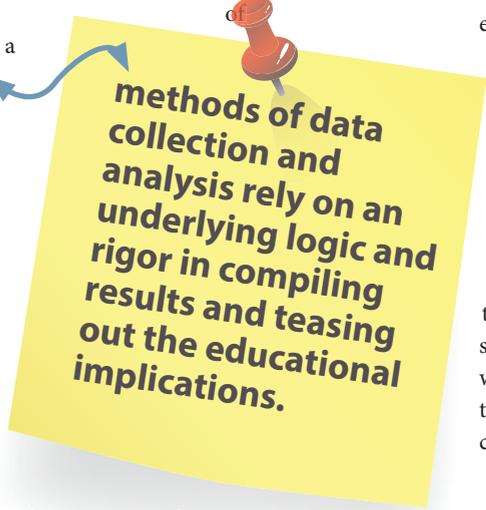
Sketch of Human Science Research.

**Typically, research evidence takes two basic forms, QUANTITATIVE and QUALITATIVE, or a combination of both.** However, irrespective of whether data are expressed as numbers, words or pictures, they are subject to standard methods of analysis and interpretation. When using quantitative measures to design human science studies, statistical analyses can be applied to assess the significance of the results if conventions for collecting and analyzing data have been followed. “Statistically significant” means the results of a study are likely (or not) to be a measure of what was hypothesized and tested, and a probable level of confidence in the outcomes.

Qualitative human science research, on the other hand, **uses concepts and themes to interpret patterns of information** gathered from multiple sources and often in many forms. Data from different sources are cross-checked to identify common categories of content and compared to verify the ideas and themes discovered. When sufficient data are collected, collated and combined to **describe relationships among the themes** that emerge interpretations are agreed upon and conclusions drawn.

In designing and carrying out human science studies and reporting the results, the researcher provides evidence to ensure the outcomes are well-supported, reliable and offer a probable or plausible basis for making decisions. It does not matter whether a study follows the linear procedures of quantitative methods, the cyclical patterns of qualitative research, or a combination of both.

When applied in systematic ways that combine **the doubt of science** and the **creative and critical lens of art**, human science research can be applied in the study of art educational matters. For instance, in planning research projects, an arts-based educational researcher adapts the rational methods of social science inquiry to the visual approaches to problem finding, problem solving, and creative explorations typically found in the art and design studio-classroom.



methods of data collection and analysis rely on an underlying logic and rigor in compiling results and teasing out the educational implications.

## Arts-Based Educational Research (ABER)

In disrupting the limits of the quantitative-qualitative divide of human science inquiry, arts-based educational research (ABER) expands the research continuum whereby “poetry, visual images, drama, music and other artistic forms become integral to the empirical project” (Cahnmann-Taylor, 2008, p. 5). Arts-based educational research builds on Elliot Eisner’s long-time critique of conventional educational research methods, which he asserts rely on unsound assumptions **that separate the so-called objective world out there, and subjective realities we know**. For Eisner (2008), it is precisely the qualities of the arts that can be used as robust instruments of inquiry that have the potential to reveal more about everyday complexities we face. He explains, that “the very conditions that make a study arts-based are conditions that personalize the study or situation by allowing the investigator’s thumbprint to work its magic in illuminating the scene... the general resides in the particular and making general observations from particular circumstances is precisely what we do in life” (p. 20).

At its most elemental, **arts-based educational research is a localized or context-rich example of human science inquiry** that expands the scope of research by applying artistic processes to creatively explore the myriad issues facing art educators. Others, however, assert that arts-based educational approaches to research that remain firmly hinged to qualitative social science research methods cannot accommodate or account for the uncertainties, complexities and ambitions, asked of the arts (Baldacchino, 2012; jagodzinski & Wallin, 2013).

## Arts and Culture Research: *Inside Interpretive Knowledge*

A long-term purpose of artistic inquiry is to probe the interior reaches of what it is to be human. The assumption of arts and culture research is that we learn from our interaction and engagement with the arts, communities, education, politics, economics and so on. However, culture and community continue to reflect the uncertainties of the times in which we live. In today’s connected societies the world zooms by with unblinking speed and zaps us with an image blitz of technological disruption that influences just about every aspect of most people’s lives. For those outside the divide of privilege, gaining acceptance and access to opportunity on one’s own terms remains a bleak prospect if broad and balanced entry to educational and civic resources is denied. The educational premise of arts and culture research is to take an active stance in responding to these kinds of disconnects that exist in the myriad cultural contexts we encounter.



The purposes, methods and practices of arts and culture research involve critical and creative discussions, debates and actions that bubble up in public commentary about education, society, culture, and the human good.

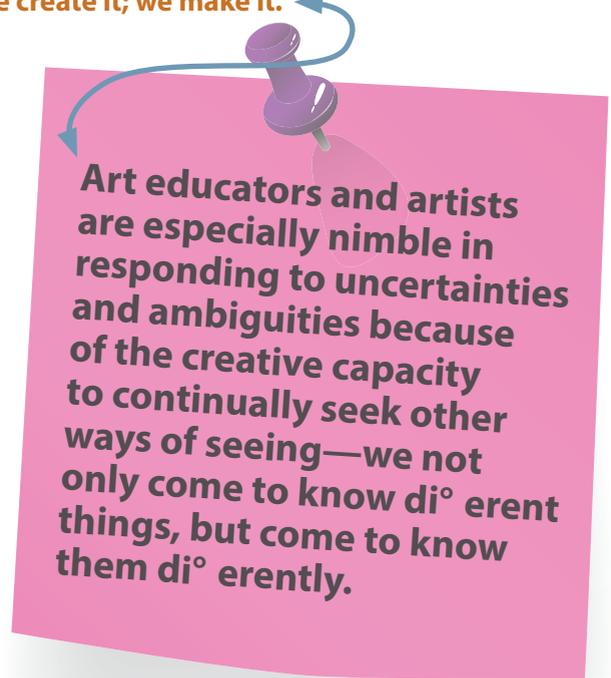
This form of inquiry has always been part of traditional disciplines of history, philosophy, sociology and the like. However, in recent times, forms of cultural inquiry are more prominent in interdisciplinary studies as the borders between disciplines have been breached and new study areas emerge. **There is also an increasing array of hybrid yields opening up gaps and overlaps as new knowledge systems branch, bond, and blast apart into forms we’ve never seen before**, and on a scale that reveals entirely different problems to ponder and questions to ask.

When we think of how knowledge is connected today, however, nothing seems new. David Weinberger (2011) makes the case that as knowledge is networked online we lose our means of giving it order and making sense of it because we can access information in limitless forms. He also says the internet is endless, and therefore, **“no edges means no shape. And no shape means that networked knowledge lacks what we have long taken to be essential to the structure of knowledge: a foundation”** (p. 17).

What Weinberger sees as a problem of lack of foundational knowledge is precisely the promise of possibility that arises from visual arts and design practices. The practice of forming collective understanding across networks of knowledge affirms the educational premise that students’ educational achievement is strengthened when they make connections across learning areas. **For art educators, a key aspect about making connections is the emphasis on “making,” because it is the multiple ways that learners engage in making—conceptually, creatively, physically, practically, publicly—that increases the likelihood of individual success in making meaning.**

Once systems of knowledge are opened up, doubt is cast not only on what is basic and foundational, but also on relationships within, among and between knowledge systems. Visual arts and design are

continually changing creative knowledge systems—in our art classrooms and studios **we don’t deliver knowledge, we create it; we make it.**



Sketch of Arts and Culture Research.

Arts and culture research tends to be problem-based as researchers adopt a critical stance in questioning ideas, policies and practices. Varied factors influence the multiple ways knowledge is created, collected and collated as interpretations are made and acted upon. The procedures researchers use rely on a **seamless integration of knowledge where interpretation and meaning merge to form the basis for building arguments**. The relevance of the problems addressed, and the logic of the issues raised by researchers are dependent on sound reasoning. Although we honor uncertain and open-ended processes and practices, cultural theorists, artists and critical practitioners don't make interpretations without reason and purpose.

## Arts-Based Research (ABR)

Art education is well served by arts-based researchers who undertake cultural inquiry within the creative traditions of the studio and engage critically with the community. These researchers consciously use artistic procedures as core research processes to investigate the conditions that can shape complex human thought and action (Biggs & Karlsson, 2010; Knowles & Cole, 2008). For example, researchers who take on the mantle of Autoethnographers, research is seen to be "living inquiry" (Irwin & de Crosson, 2004), which means the research activity is embedded in communities and shaped by local needs and aspirations. **In a similar way that integrated school curricula come alive when subject areas overlap,**



James Haywood Rolling Jr. (2013) suggests arts-based research "stems directly from a researcher's artistic practice or creative worldview" and "that can neither be measured with exactitude nor generalized as universally applicable or meaningful in all contexts" (p. 32-33). In other words, arts-based research practices "address questions differently than scientific research will allow" (p. 7). Rolling reminds us that **arts-based research is a cultural practice and a form of interdisciplinary inquiry because it opens up spaces within and across art, culture, research, and teaching.**

Susan Finley adds that arts-based research "makes use of diverse ways of knowing and experiencing the world" (2008, p. 79). These varied forms of representation are especially effective in responding to the complexities of how individuals, groups and communities construct knowledge through stories and experiences that form the basis of their educational, social and cultural practices. **To explore the creative capacity of local practices we shift the discussion to practitioner research.**

## Practitioner Research: *Towards Transformative Knowledge*

Practitioner research is conducted by art educators, artists, and others who are knowledgeable 'insiders' astute in creating new ways to improve their professional practice. Practitioners mix relevant knowledge with local insight to increase their capacity to make meaningful decisions. **In public settings** such as schools, museums and communities where teacher-practitioners work, addressing educational issues and problems makes use of methods such as participatory action research and self-study. **In personal settings** such as art studios, digital worlds, and community collectives where art-practitioners work, responding to critical and creative concerns involves artistic inquiry such as *practice-based research*. Taken together, research approaches that use art teaching and art practice as methods of creative inquiry can be described as practitioner research.

Advocates of practitioner research undertaken by classroom teachers of art support the idea that **teacher-practitioners** should develop their research capabilities by building working theories of teaching and learning. Melanie Buckingham and Sara Wilson McKay (2013) explain that "in gaining self-knowledge about what you value and what theories you employ in your practice, research, particularly based in practice, can be a way to broaden

theories you consider, work with, and form on a daily basis" (p. 12). Nancy Fichtman and Diane Yendol-Silva (2003) cite a teacher's reflective journal entry that defines practitioner research as "a method of gaining insight from hindsight" (L. Brown, cited in Fichtman & Yendol-Silva, p. 5).

Those who view art practice as a form of research argue that **artist-practitioners** not only collect input from their creative encounters within the worlds they inhabit, but also create profound responses to these experiences. Henk Slager (2012) describes the changing cultural climate that motivates art-practitioners to embrace expansive notions of what 'the studio' might mean. He says that "art practices show that art and method can link in various constructive ways, since a shift has emerged from art practices focusing on end products to art practices dealing with experimental, laboratory-style environments and researching novel forms of knowledge and experience" (p. 22). In other words, studio art-practice "opens up the landscape of research and positions the artist and art educator in it, for when artmaking is placed within the culture of research, imaginative practices have the capacity to reveal new truths" (Sullivan, 2010, p. xii).

What is common for teacher and artist practitioners is the use of studio materials and methods as core components of research and practice. There is general acceptance that ‘thinking and doing’ embraces many learning modalities that not only instill competencies, but also build confidence, affirm individual and group identity, and generally develop capabilities for effective decision making. Practitioner research, whether undertaken in the classroom or the studio is also an authentic mode of individual inquiry that gives permission to “re-search” one’s studio or teaching practice.

Classroom settings are ideal sites for creating the conditions for transformative learning as students engage in creative processes through material forming practices and critical thinking processes. These studio experiences set the conditions for transformative learning whereby art educators, artists and students are all active participants in a learning community (Caldwell & Vaughan, 2012). Unfortunately, however, this is not common view. We have witnessed the narrowing of the curriculum and the implementation of a regressive regime of *deyicit learning*, where learning is measured by what students don’t know.<sup>3</sup> **This is at odds with what art educators know, which is based on an implicit understanding that**

## Practice-Based Research

Practitioner research draws its purposes and processes mostly from the media and methods of the studio and the art classroom. These practices provide inventive clues about how to design studies, projects, and activities for collecting and creating data to suit particular needs and interests. The approach of adapting the means of inquiry from the studio art classroom is acknowledged in the NAEA Research Commission Research Vision Statement:

**Art education enables individuals to integrate experience and knowledge into meaningful forms of knowing by using media and methods to create new understandings. The media of art include a diverse array of texts, images, objects, events, and technologies that comprise the form and content of the field. The methods of art include creative and critical approaches to inquiry and reflection that bring art to diverse audiences. Art education researchers use the processes and practices of art and, multiple modes of inquiry, within diverse contexts, to respond to important issues and problems.** (NAEA Research Commission Research Vision Statement, 2012, n.p.)

The literature on practitioner research in the arts includes two slightly different ways of undertaking practitioner-based inquiries and these procedures have generated terms that have particular meaning in different research communities around the globe. *Practice-based research* is an “in-folding” process of critical reflective and creative action that involves “looking inside” for possibilities within one’s practice and is highly adaptable as a research methodology or a teaching philosophy (Sullivan, 2009). A variant,

**Learners who are given the opportunity to participate in creative, critical and collaborative activities and discussions around the ‘practices of doing’ have profound and sustaining learning experiences.**

**There is little that art learners cannot aspire to and achieve.**



Sketch of Practitioner Research.

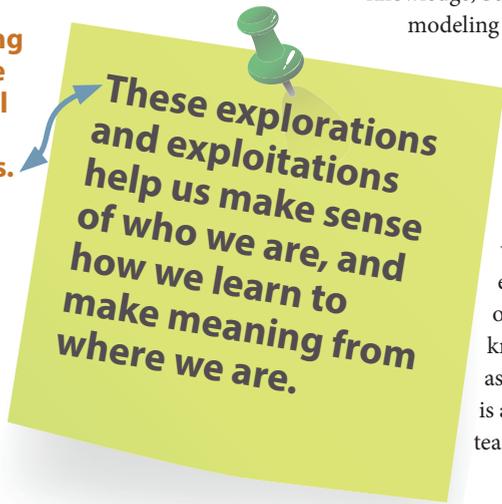
*practice-led research*, is an ‘unfolding’ process that combines the investigative manner of the practitioner, the imaginative space of the studio, and the innovative challenge of art teaching to reveal meaningful connections leading to new insights about educational and cultural practices (Smith & Dean, 2009).

In other practitioner communities across Europe, research that specifically focuses on studio art as a research practice is termed *artistic research* (Hannula, Suoranta, Vadén, 2014; Slager, 2012). In these settings, practitioner research is undertaken in studio contexts where art practice is acknowledged as a form of research (Schwarzenbach & Hackett, 2016; Sullivan, 2010). The site specific nature of practitioner research ‘surrounds problems’ in connecting art production, critical studio processes, and studies of teaching and learning, with the artist and educator playing a key role. The studio in all its traditional and expansive, contemporary forms is first and foremost the central source of experience and potential knowledge and insight, and hence a place of research.

## The Promise of Studio Practice

Artists and art educators are well placed to use the exploratory practices of art and teaching to address important cultural and educational matters. Inspired by the expressive power of material, form and experience, the influence of digital technologies, and access to diverse visual methods, artist practitioners are cultural producers who aim their creative and critical eye at issues of personal and public interest (Louden, 2017). Similarly, teacher practitioners have an expansive understanding of the possibilities inherent in creative human potential and the problems that inhibit growth. Hence, **art classrooms are places of purposeful and transformative learning where art educators apply their tacit and tactical knowledge to create the caring and experiential conditions for individuals to thrive** (Burton & Hafeli, 2012).

Artists do something similar in their studios. They expand our understanding of the cognitive and creative processes involved in making through the multiple ways they ‘think’ in art media as they fashion their ‘making’ languages. The studio is the place we are born into, when the hard wiring that helps shape who we are awaits the formative cues necessary to help us flourish. **The studio is where our capabilities of thinking, making, and doing merge amid the interactive and messy multidirectional processes that give rise to our actions and aspirations.**



These explorations and exploitations help us make sense of who we are, and how we learn to make meaning from where we are.

Dónal O’Donoghue (2015) describes artistic thinking and making practices as comprising “tugs, pulls, pushes and heaves; these acts of giving, receiving, taking and being taken; these opportunities to go places conceptually, materially, instinctually, intellectually and actively... are what we might describe as the *practice of making*” (p. 107. Emphasis added). The impact of artful making practices is further intensified by the expanded reach of the artist’ studio today, which occupies private, public, virtual and augmented spaces and embraces all the surrounding social, cultural and global settings.

**The studio is also a metaphorical place of flexibility and adaptability that is chaotic in confirming and destabilizing our predictions of what makes sense—it’s a place where chance nudges aside constraints as we translate, transform and transition to a place of momentary awareness.** If a goal is to deepen our understanding of possibilities, then this needs to be uncoupled from a reliance on merely knowing what’s probable or plausible. Valerie Triggs, Rita Irwin, and Donal O’Donoghue (2014) suggest that even *possibility* has its limits and artistic and pedagogical practice is an ongoing process of going beyond the reach of one’s potential. They explain, “no single logic or theoretical framework is flexible enough to encompass the concrete abstractness of experience” (p. 260). **Understanding visual encounters and experiences can indeed be seen as a dynamic process of change that travels in every possible direction and dimension.**

## The Possibilities Are Edgeless

Contemporary art continually moves any framing, disciplinary edges and is masterful at shape shifting. As such, **a most viable base from which the yield can be grounded is from a position that honors the centrality of the ever-expanding role of the artist and teacher practitioner.** Practitioners have the capacity to take on the multiple roles of researcher and educator and lead the way. They have the competencies, capabilities and curiosity to assume leadership roles in important ways through the cultural capital they create. This personal agency comes from sharing new knowledge, building relationships, breaking down barriers, and modeling how to be responsive and nimble in championing the transformative impact of visual arts learning among individuals and within communities. This expanded view of educational practice invests in human potential and when fostered in multiple ways through diverse media the promise of improving the individual agency of everyone is within reach. This is a relational view of artistic and educational practice that cannot be fully predicted or anticipated. It is shaped by an edgeless notion of knowledge that sees interaction and collaboration as crucial elements in how meaningful learning is achieved and enacted upon. As a result, artists, teachers and learners all become activists in using

the multiple forms knowledge can take when asking perceptive questions, communicating ideas, and expressing viewpoints.

Art practice continues to change the way we think about the possibilities of research and the promise of improved educational practices. To enact change that is meaningful is to believe that **artistically minded practitioners can engage the distinctive forms of experience, methods and media of visual art and design, and embrace one's inherent educational knowledge of local learning contexts.**

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Hence, mindful art educational processes resonate with resilient studio practices because artists and art educators are practitioner researchers who speak the same language.

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## Endnotes

- 1 The NAEA Strategic Vision (2015-2020) can be found at [www.arteducators.org/advocacy/articles/208-naea-strategic-vision](http://www.arteducators.org/advocacy/articles/208-naea-strategic-vision)
- 2 The NAEA Research Commission Research Vision Statement can be found at [www.arteducators.org/research/commission/about-research-vision-statement](http://www.arteducators.org/research/commission/about-research-vision-statement)
- 3 The prevailing gold standard for assessing research outcomes advocates metrics of "evidence-based research," expressed as quantitative measures. Practitioner research on the other hand, places the emphasis on compiling evidence that is grounded in meaningful accounts of experience where change and growth are localized and richly contextualized. Practitioner research emphasizes the importance of creating and constructing "practice-based evidence," where the markers of success are produced as a result of the practices of art and teaching. Practice-based evidence is a concept that expands the range and authenticity of research outcomes beyond narrow definitions of evidence as an educational method for confirming learning achievement.