

# Investigating Professional Identity Development Through Arts-Based Duoethnography

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Résumé de l'article

This study employs an arts-based duoethnographic approach to contemplate the nuances of and understand the struggles that two researchers confronted in their new professional roles as art educators. The investigation focuses on how conversations, art practices, and reflective/diffractive analysis can help with understanding or processing professional identity development. The data include art practices, field notes, monthly meetings, and emails sent between February and May 2019. The main content of this article presents the two researchers' exchange of emails and art pieces as part of the preliminary data analysis. Two pivotal elements stand out in the exploration: diffracting relationships and deconstructing perspectives that support growth and development during the process. Additionally, the investigation affirms that positive differences can be produced even though two researchers hold distinct perspectives. The methodology supports professional identity development as an ongoing and deconstructing process of searching for differences and being different.

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## INVESTIGATING PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT THROUGH ARTS-BASED DUOETHNOGRAPHY

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**Abstract:** This study employs an arts-based duoethnographic approach to contemplate the nuances of and understand the struggles that two researchers confronted in their new professional roles as art educators. The investigation focuses on how conversations, art practices, and reflective/diffractive analysis can help with understanding or processing professional identity development. The data include art practices, field notes, monthly meetings, and emails sent between February and May 2019. The main content of this article presents the two researchers' exchange of emails and art pieces as part of the preliminary data analysis. Two pivotal elements stand out in the exploration: diffracting relationships and

deconstructing perspectives that support growth and development during the process. Additionally, the investigation affirms that positive differences can be produced even though two researchers hold distinct perspectives. The methodology supports professional identity development as an ongoing and deconstructing process of searching for differences and being different.

**Keywords:** arts-based duoethnography; professional development; teacher identity; identity development; diffraction; deconstruction

We, the two authors of this article, have been good friends since our first year in college and have supported each other's lives and academic learning since then. In our first collaborative arts-based duoethnography (Chien and Yang, 2019), we exchanged arts-based letters, which included our thoughts about our theoretical explorations of the Reggio Emilia approach and transformative learning theories<sup>1</sup>, along with the art pieces we created in the process. We learned a lot from exchanging our opinions throughout the project, and rethought our research and teaching perspectives by contemplating each other's theoretical discoveries and artistic interpretations. We, therefore, wanted to apply the same explorative method to a new study. With Claire on the way to becoming a new faculty member encountering many environmental and school cultural transitions, and Hsiu-Chun a Ph.D. candidate facing a bottleneck while working on her dissertation, we decided to use our arts-based duoethnography methodology to investigate the development of our professional identities.

In this study, we employed an arts-based approach to contemplate the nuances of and understand the struggles we confronted in our new professional roles in art education. In the presentation of our exploration and insights, we challenged ourselves with a different way of doing qualitative research. In this article, we show readers how we first created dialogue along with art representations, then engaged in further dialogue in order to conclude how we transformed during professional identity development.

### **Research Inquiry: Exploring Professional Identities**

In this study, we started our inquiries by exploring our transitional and intersectional professional identities in the process of being first-year tenure-track faculty and a PhD candidate who has completed her research but not her dissertation. We wanted to investigate how art making and analyses through dialogue could help us understand or process the development.

We are not unique in our struggles and doubts about our professional identity in transitioning from doctoral students to faculty positions (Guyotte et al., 2018; Pellegrino et al., 2014; Shields and Hamrock, 2017; Walker and Yoon, 2017). Although we both confronted similar struggles mentioned in these studies (such as experiencing self-doubt and fear of failure as researchers and new faculty members, struggling to establish balance, craving for networking opportunities and recognition in the field, etc.), we also experienced this professional identity transformation in unique ways.

### **Claire's Inquiry for the Transition of Professional Identity**

In my case, when we started the research, I was adapting to my new life and role as an assistant professor in the Art Education Program at a public state university. I also had to

adjust my 'professional performance' to a different school culture and student body. The undergraduate students between the two universities were different. Because students from all over the United States were enrolled at University A, where I used to teach as a graduate teaching assistant, the student body was very diverse. The academic competition was intense at University A compared to University C, where I am teaching now.

University C is located in a city with a largely white population, and the students I teach are predominantly white (90%) and from local areas. Most of them have to work two to three part-time jobs. These students' priorities are to support themselves and maintain acceptable academic performance for graduation. Soon after arriving at my new university, I struggled to align my own academic expectations with those of the students in my courses, and spent a lot of time making adjustments. The balance of expectations and building relationships became the two most essential challenges in my first year as a faculty member. In addition to fitting into my new position, I was also busy adapting to a new living environment.

## **Hsiu-Chun's Inquiry for the Transition of Professional Identity**

Throughout this duo arts-based inquiry, I was not a novice researcher because I conducted several research projects in my master's and doctoral courses (Chien and Yang, 2019; Yang, 2012). Nevertheless, I still faced the difficult situation that many other doctoral students have faced throughout their own research, namely, self-doubt regarding professional abilities and fear of being independent (Pellegrino et al., 2014).

In my doctoral research, I employed 'diffractive ethnography,' which focuses on discovering diffractive patterns located in a renewal relationality among humans and nonhumans, words, and materials (Gullion, 2018). It was my first time trying to explore diffractive ethnography, including art practices, through my research. I was excited but anxious at the same time. On the one hand, I was looking forward to the challenge of using diffractive ethnography in my research. On the other, I was nervous because I had limited knowledge regarding how to approach this type of research. Another factor that brought me anxiety was the fear of being an independent researcher in the study. Doctoral research is completely different from master's research. 'Sink or swim' is a classic idiom I use to delineate the independence required of a doctoral student. I could not always wait for my advisors to tell me how to do research. I needed to tackle my questions by myself because I was the author of this study. Throughout the research, my curiosity continuously mingled with my stress, and I struggled to justify the legitimacy and authenticity of my research methods and relationships with the research participants during the process.

## Theoretical Framework & Methodology

### Intersecting Inquiries through the Lenses of Deconstruction and Diffraction

I (Claire), was specifically interested in how 'dialogic transitions' can assist in negotiating with deconstructing and reconstructing my understanding of my professional identity as a new tenure-track faculty member in the context of Derrida's Deconstruction (Derrida, 2002; Derrida and Caputo, 1997). According to Derrida, people must *negotiate* with themselves so that deconstruction can happen (Derrida, 2002). He states, 'There is a negotiation in deconstruction, between the values, themes, meanings, philosophies that are deconstructed and a certain maintenance, or survival of their efforts' (2002:16). But how can arts-based duoethnography help me to negotiate the deconstruction and reconstruction of my professional identity?

I (Hsiu-Chun) stick to a posthumanist paradigm, which shifts from a human-centered approach to a more-than-human model. Using Barad's (2007) theory of diffraction as a jumping-off point, I am interested in finding more-than-human intra-actions produced by materiality to avoid the binary logic and dominance of representation and languages. Diffraction, as commonly understood, is a physical phenomenon describing the alteration of wave patterns when encountering an interference or obstruction (Barad, 2007). According to Barad (2007), diffraction marks the generation of difference and the material encounters with apparatuses. This arts-based duoethnography serves as an apparatus involved in conversations and art practices. What differences in my researcher identity can I identify using this exploratory investigation?

### Using Arts-based Duoethnography as Methodology to Explore Inquiries

Arts-based methods, such as painting, drawing, and performance, have been proven to be useful reflective practices in teacher education, particularly in the arts fields (Gouthro, 2019; Koc, 2011; Shields and Hamrock, 2017). In one survey study that McKay and Sappa (2019) conducted, they organized and categorized 522 studies published in English that were focused on employing an arts-based approach to construct a teacher's professional identity. In this article, the authors use four themes to summarise the ways in which the use of creative processes contribute to the development of a teacher's professional identity: reflecting differently, becoming differently, being differently, and doing differently (McKay and Sappa, 2019:33). Our research results support McKay and Sappa's (2019) conclusions, which we will explain in detail in the later sections.

Duoethnography, defined as an 'embodied reflection,' allows two researchers to investigate shared topics of inquiry utilizing dialogue for the 'generation of new insights and understandings' (Brown and Sawyer, 2016:5). As we learned from our previous arts-based

duoethnographic research (Chien and Yang, 2019), the process of using ourselves as sites to build 'dialogic transitions' (Sawyer and Norris, 2013:29) did help us to think about our inquiries and understand theories differently by listening to and contemplating from each other's perspectives. When we produced our dialogues, we did not just create texts, but also embodied our visual representations as another language in the dialogic process. We, therefore, identified our approach as arts-based duoethnography. By combining art and texts, this 'intertextuality facilitates practitioners' development of new relationships with themselves and their patterns of perception—or even imagination—to specific topics and situations' (Brown and Sawyer, 2016:10).

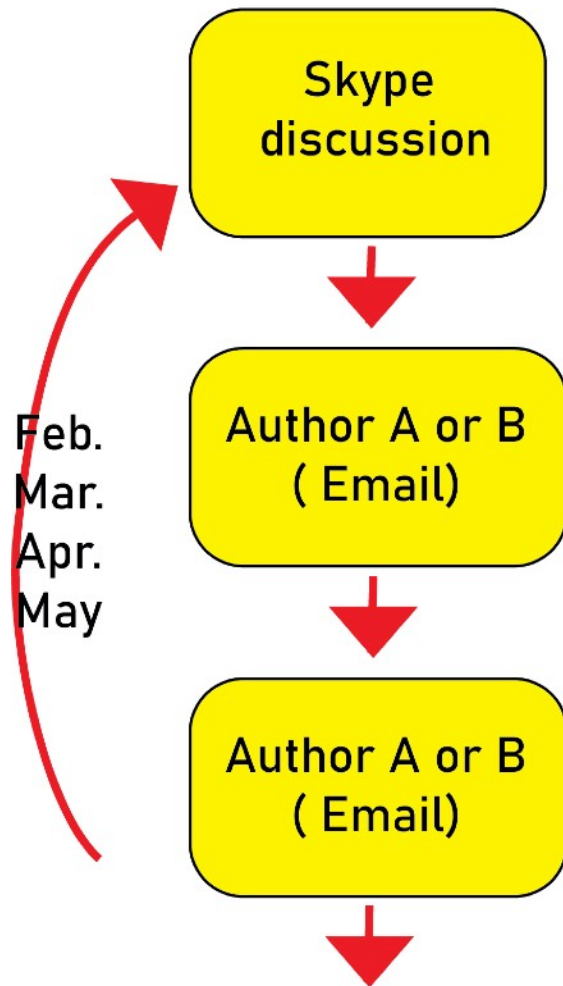
## **Research Materials, Insights, and Analysis**

In this study, we drew from our art practices, fieldnotes, monthly meetings, and emails. Along with our teaching/researching experiences, we first made reflective art pieces (Claire) and maintained a diffractive journal (Hsiu-Chun), chewing over our professions as art educators in higher education and early childhood education. Then we shared our art practices and interviewed each other during monthly meetings between February and May 2019. The central idea we examined in the meetings was how art-making helped us to understand our research.

After every monthly meeting, we wrote each other emails as a preliminary analysis (Figure 1). The emails entailed our respective understandings and interpretations of the other person's art practices. The emails converted the initial analysis into a dynamic of our professional development. When we completed the process over five months, we met in person to reflect on the process and decide how we wanted to present it. In this article, we decided to use a dialogue style to display our findings. In doing so, we carried through the dialectic methodology that we applied to the research. In the next section, we will display email excerpts to demonstrate our methodology for the diffracting and deconstructing process of our professional identities using emails, conversations, and art making.

**Figure 1**  
*Analysis process (Claire and Hsiu-Chun).*

**Preliminary Analysis:  
Monthly Conversation**



**Second analysis:  
In-person discussion**



## Constructing Identity Process

### *Selected Art Pieces from February Discussion*

#### **Claire's art making process of 'de/construction':**

I began my art making/reflecting process from the idea of 'construction.' I tried to absorb all the information that I was given from the new university and department to learn/construct my professional identity as an assistant professor. I set out to repurpose the documents that I received and made them into paper bricks as a metaphor for professional construction (Figure 2). In the meantime, I continued exploring the weaving techniques that I used in my doctoral research as another metaphor for my actions about interweaving new relationships at my new place. I integrated the handmade paper that I made during the process of making my paper brick with the weaving process (Figure 3). The ship represents me sailing toward a known future but having to cope with a lot of unknown challenges. The red tassels represent my passion as a newly graduated doctoral student.

#### **Figure 2**

*Paper brick trials.*



#### **Figure 3**

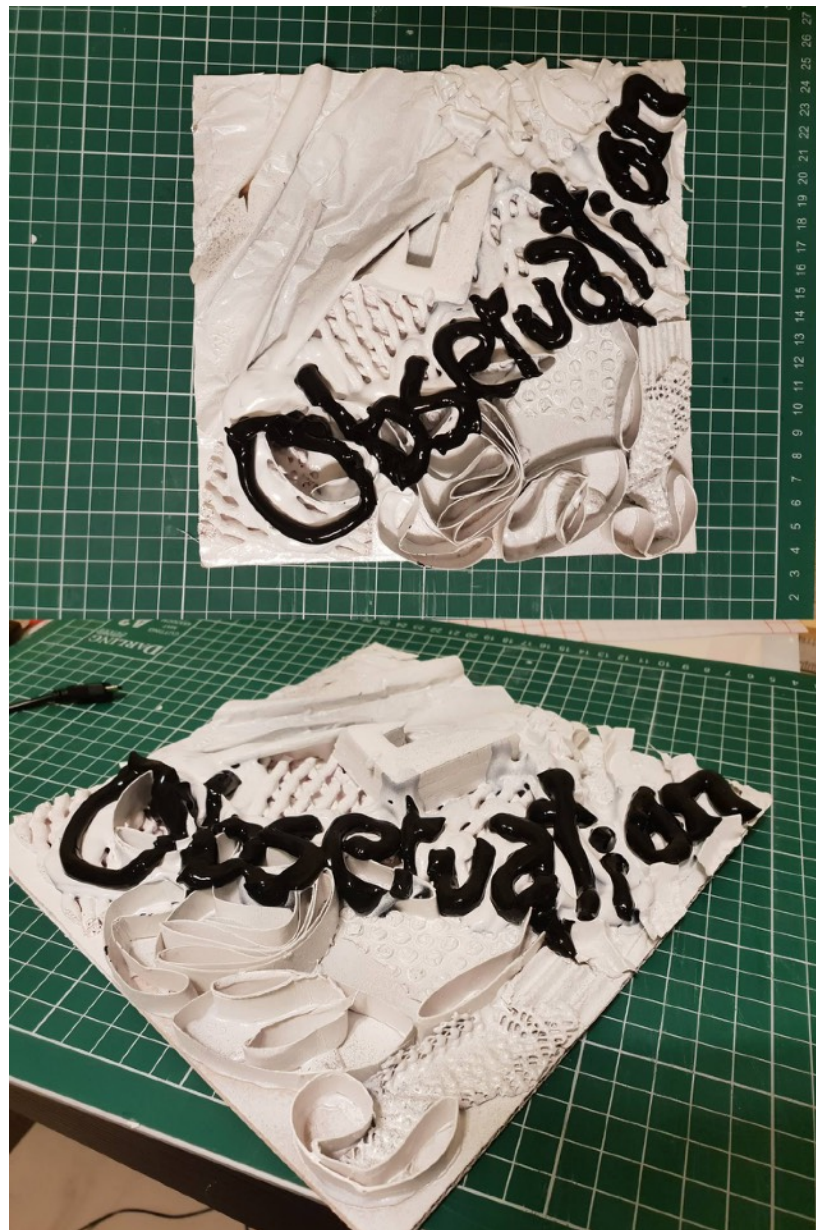
*An experiment in integrating handmade paper*



**Hsiu-Chun’s artmaking process of ‘observation’:**

Working with a posthumanist approach, I was struggling to see how observation is not a kind of documentation, or black words on a white paper, separating the observer and the observed. Instead, observation is an intra-action mapping between objects and agencies (Barad, 2007). To think beyond this point, I tried to make a creation that represents observation, not something flat like writing something down on a sheet but versatile depending on different points of view and the environment (Figure 4).

**Figure 4**  
*‘Two different angles of ‘observation.’*



## ***Claire's Email Response***

Dear Hsiu-Chun:

You made the documentation of observation become an act of creating an organic sculpture. Your action of pouring the black acrylic to write the text is also metaphorical. While you were experiencing the process of 'writing' the 'observation' on a 'paper,' you realized that text was usually seen as flat characters on a piece of paper. The observation is deconstructed when this bulky acrylic paint loses its text shape because of the three-dimensional surface. The initial appearance of the text was twisted, and then it began to show diverse manifestations. This action made you reflect on the transformation of text and how text interacted with and attached its meaning to the space provided within the environment. Your understanding was not based upon one 'writing.' As you officially wrote the word 'observation' on your work twice to experiment with the effect, you repeatedly thought about how and why you were writing it in this way, although you still did not know what the result would be.

Recently, I found that repetitive experimenting practice was enormously important in my own art-making practices when I reflected on my teaching and learning to adapt to a new professional career. As you know, I was collecting paper from my new life to create paper bricks as a metaphor for my development, however, it was much more difficult to put the creation of my imagined paper bricks into practice. My stubbornness in every decision relating to my personal feelings or learning made me have a hard time choosing materials. My first paper brick failed. My second paper brick was successful but took too long to dry. I could not make many paper bricks at once. These failures kept bothering me. I had to stop the project for a while until I could find a better solution to make the paper bricks.

I continued to explore other metaphorical art methods, such as weaving and rug making, that could represent my reflections, but the handmade paper was always incorporated into my practices. I knew that you also thought about and tried many experiments throughout your art making for a long time. Did you feel the same way that I felt? What was the fundamental method or spirit you considered when crafting the arts-based representation of your professional development?

I guess we should never stop trying, even if that means we have to pause what we are doing in researching or teaching for a while and seek other possibilities.

Until next time,  
Claire

## ***Hsiu-Chun's Email Response***

Dear Claire,

You shared several pieces you are working on now. First, I found that technique development is essential for makers to move things forward. I was inspired by the story of how you created your weaving project and the techniques you learned. I supposed that learning the techniques you applied (in searching for a better way to present your ideas in your artworks) is an evitable and imperative process. At the end of our conversation, you suggested the idea of using dry mushrooms in my work, and I wondered how to represent the mushrooms as the idea of 'organic.' In correspondence with my making process, I pondered over what techniques would be better for my project. I realized from our conversation that different techniques may stand as opportunities for us to learn something new, see something new, and think something new. All the techniques we use are also about our choices when it comes to thinking about our stories, experiences, and works.

Continuing my thoughts about techniques as learning opportunities, I was also impressed by what you said you learned from making the ship, when what you thought would be an easy part of the process turned out to be difficult. You related this to the growth process and said, 'This is like when you believe you have enough knowledge, but you do not. You need assistance from others. You have to deconstruct yourself and then construct a stronger basis for yourself.' I feel the same way.

When you combined the ship (yourself), the ocean (your teaching environment), the fire (your passion), and so on, you created metaphors for your identity transition as a new PhD graduate. During art making, we are playing with metaphors by projecting an idea onto objects. Whether making or reading a metaphor, it leads me to connect things. A metaphor is like a world that leaves plenty of space for interpretation. That is why I say a metaphor is magical. I found this magic in your experiences because of how you connected your art making to your growth process. Talk to you next time.

All the best,  
Hsiu-Chun

## ***Selected Art Pieces from March Discussion***

### **Claire's art-making process of adaptation and fitting in:**

I contemplated my struggles when I 'weaved' into my new teaching and working environment. I thought about how the technique of using a punch needle was a metaphorical action of creating relationships with people because it asked me to pay attention to the tension between the pull and push, and color representations (Figure 5). Although I started with the yarns that I purchased, I began to think about whether I could dye the yarns with the colors I brought from my hometown (Figure 6). The pigment was the blue I used for creating Chinese paintings in college. It represented how I started to think about my Asian identity at a school that is mostly white. Did that influence me to build my relationships with students and colleagues?

**Figure 5**

*The first punch needle piece*



**Figure 6**

*Dyeing yarn with Chinese painting pigment*

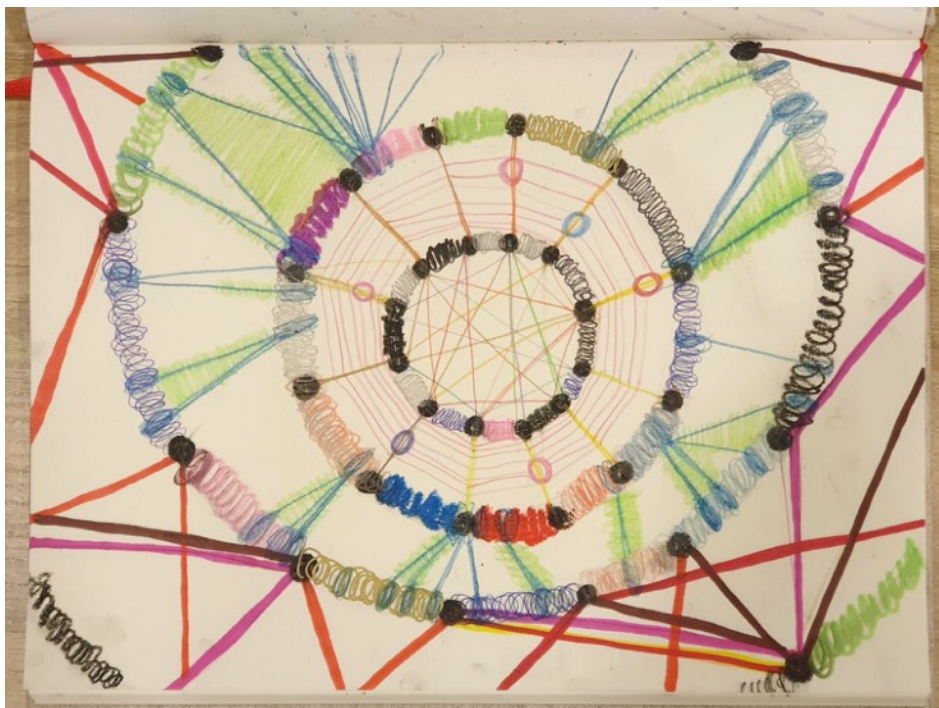
**Hsiu-Chun's art-making process of observation and perspective:**

How could I make my observations more organic in my research? How could I let research observation play a more active role during my investigation? In this prompt, I added some dry mushrooms to my observation creation in the hope that they would bring an unexpected and entangled effect to this creation (Figure 7). Another art practice I shared was my art journal, which was also included in my doctoral study (Figure 8). One of the journal entries was about making a dreamcatcher. Making a dreamcatcher was a class activity that my teacher participants and I decided to do with children at a preschool (the research site). This hands-on activity demonstrated how art functions in a project. I drew a dreamcatcher in the journal to simulate what learning opportunities making a dreamcatcher can bring to students.

**Figure 7**  
*Added dry mushrooms to 'observation.'*



**Figure 8**  
*A journal entry: A dreamcatcher.*



## ***Claire's Email Response***

Dear Hsiu-Chun,

I wanted to expand my thoughts on our last conversation about every medium we applied to our art pieces being metaphorical, and making you rethink Barad's diffractive methodology, which she refers to as a 'commitment to understanding which differences matter, how they matter, and for whom' (Barad, 2007:90). You thought about becoming a thing that you wanted to diffract, and tried to think from that thing's point of view. In doing so, you tried to understand what the factors were that influenced the thing. You used the current dreamcatcher art project that you are working on with your research participants as an example. You tried to imagine yourself as the string of a dreamcatcher. You said that a string could not become a shape without attachment. Without the customary circular frame of a dreamcatcher, you could not weave a web. Without a web, there would be no dreamcatcher.

You projected yourself on the research elements of your study while I embedded my body movements when I interacted with the media or art methods I applied to contemplate my research or teaching. We each applied a different diffractive approach to explore our inquiries using art. You emphasized an understanding of the characters of your research so that you could 'play different roles in one play'; I was focused on analyzing and adjusting my 'acting' for one singular role as a new faculty member.

To adapt to our new environments, we both had to work with the existing structures and adjust our own perspectives to look at them. We saw the differences. We liked some and were suspicious of others. We both tried to negotiate with these differences and decide if we would compromise with them or not. It was a deconstructive process of questioning, rethinking, accepting, and filtering. We negotiated with ourselves and others to construct a new structure. It was also a process of diffracting. By seeing the differences, we tried to apply different lenses to look at an issue, problem, teaching, and learning. We were diffracted by reflecting, and might also diffract other people by providing them with different methods to approach a topic. . .

Until next time.

Best,

Claire



## ***Hsiu-Chun's Email Response***

Hi dear Claire,

After each of our meetings, I felt inspired and rejuvenated about my ongoing research. I am writing to you with some of my thoughts about your works.

Rug. I am so excited to see how your rugs evolved and imagine what it would be like if I could stand on them. When you talked about the change of the rug's presentation, which is how you organize the space by the choice of colors, the color configuration on the rug represented your reflection on being a new faculty member. I wonder how the process of making a rug affects your teaching experiences. I can envision how viewers could understand this work through visual and tactile sensations in that space, which showed a world full of possibilities.

The dyed yarn. I felt the same way when you shared your story about dyeing the yarn, since we have the same racial and cultural background. Even though dyeing yarn is not a project, but rather a process of your rug project, it serves as a metaphor for the becoming of others (other colors, other cultures), and through the becoming process, absorbability and fading effect serve an interesting interactive dynamic. You may find connections relating to how you absorb another culture or how your original culture fades away. Moreover, you may reexamine the concepts of dye, absorbability, and fading effects for your experiences. For example, what does the dyeing process mean? Or what is absorbability, what is fading, and what is the relationship between absorbability and fading?

Looking forward to seeing you soon,  
Hsiu-Chun

## ***Selected Art Pieces from April Discussion***

### **Claire's rug tiles:**

The pieces I made in the past months represent my emotions during the adapting process. The timely order is from the bottom to the top (Figure 9). I also explore different techniques, such as creating concave or convex space and hanging strings to represent various feelings during the process.

**Figure 9**  
*The rug tile creations.*

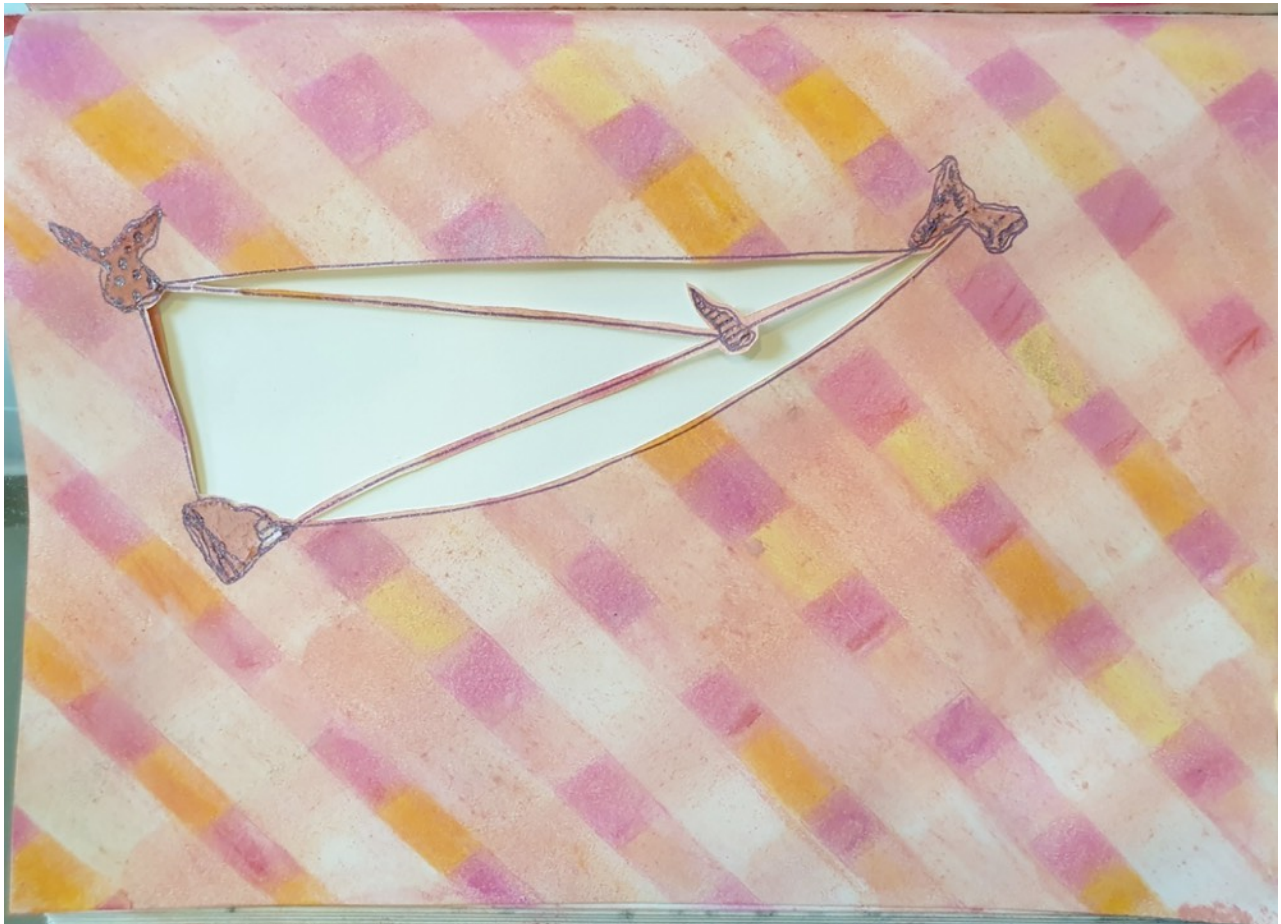


**Hsiu-Chun's art piece about 'an intra-active space':**

What does the (ontological-epistemological) theoretical framework or the (diffractive) methodology mean to my doctoral study? In this journal entry, I identified some stains in the background and used a purple pen to outline them (Figure 10). I unconsciously connected all the stains with lines, leaving an image that reminded me of the relationships between teachers, students, material, and projects that I had observed. Thinking about the intra-active relationship through the way that the lines connected the four entities, I realized that I should not only focus on the lines to consider the relationships but also attend to the negative space that people usually neglect. I cut the negative space off and made it stand out as a reminder of when I was doing research in a diffractive manner.

**Figure 10**

*A journal entry: An intra-active space.*



## ***Claire's Email Response***

My dear friend:

In our conversation about Figure 10, you said, 'When we drew on the positive space of a piece of paper, I wondered how it would look like if I presented some negative space.' The piece, our dialogue, the descriptions you used, and what I felt from our conversations deepened my understanding of new materialism: the causal relationship between us and how we interacted with these materials in the in-between space.

I shared how I applied a punch needle to make the rugs, and how the actions of pulling and poking could produce a short height on one side and a tall one on the other. The relationship between the strong and the weak is a relevant one. Through the discussion of our art-making process and products, however, I suddenly realized that my initial thought while looking at the rug piece I created was that it seemed to only show two perspectives: the front side and the back side. But there is more. Remember how we discussed how Derrida's 'différance' (1982:1-28<sup>2</sup>) corresponded to new materialism's diffraction? We started our art making from the two ends (or sides), but later we looked for nuances between the two ends. We discussed how to put ourselves in *différance* to look for possibilities and observe what caused diffractions that could happen between the two ends. The two ends' positions aren't stable because they consistently shift their positions to the front or back side based on the situations, conversations, art materials, and our reactions. All these human or non-human things positioned us in the phenomena to think, explore, and intra-act our frames of reference. When we were in the phenomena, we were not on one particular end/side, we were in *différance*, and our discoveries would contribute to a deconstruction.

Honestly, I never thought about connecting deconstruction, diffraction, and new materialism. I am so thrilled to explore these intersections! We deconstruct, diffract, re-explore, and form our new understanding of what we know in this in-between space. It is so abstract, just as art can be. And it is hard to apply precise words to describe it, as it also sometimes is with art. Nonetheless, it is so expressional and powerful to us, like art.

Until next time.

Best,  
Claire

## ***Hsiu-Chun's Email Response***

Hello dear,

I had some insightful thoughts when I heard about your recent art pieces. The first is about the growth of technique, emotion, and the self. I never thought that these elements could be effective forces leading to self-growth. Of course, I did not want to prove the causality between the three elements and self-growth. When you described pulling a thread to make a concave or convex space, I related the discovery or exploration of the concave-convex surface to an opportunity to 'deconstruct' or 'transform' your thoughts about those life events.

By juxtaposing the six rugs, it is like showing the process of your self-growth. At the bottom of the six rugs, the additional color chunks represent the occurrence of events. In the upper part, the colorful chunks disappear and come to the same color of blue with concave-convex surfaces. The blue rug is a metaphor for the mood of your first-year teaching, which is in a state of consternation in a broad ocean. You shared that the concave spaces would have represented similar events as the colorful parts at the bottom of the rugs, however, since you came to think about these events in different ways, they just became part of the ocean (the whole adapting process) instead of outstanding marks in your life. You, therefore, did not choose different colors to represent those events. I found this moment—when the new technique was understood as a chance for de-construction and transformation—to be important. It leads me to wonder about how to embrace the emergence of de-construction or transformation. Should we redefine the meanings of techniques when we apply them to artful practices or teaching? How could I also create this deconstructive or transformative moment for the teachers I am working with?

Lastly, I was so impressed when you said that there is a space, a hole for putting other threads in for further weaving. This idea resonates with my research situation. A productive or generative space comes from an intersection of different entities. Although I often felt frustrated that the teachers did not teach the way I imagined or recommended, we (you and I, the teachers and I) possess different experiences and points of view to shape a space for more possibilities. I should pay more attention to those differences as I pass through the holes of differences to create the contour of the entanglement (the teachers and me) . . .

Can't wait for the next meeting.  
Hsiu-Chun

### ***Selected Art Pieces from May Discussion***

#### **Claire's art-making process of materials and choices:**

I integrated the Chinese pigment dyed yarns (the lightest blue part) with the yarns that I was using to create the rugs, to represent my thoughts about bringing my culture to my teaching and the new environment. I also used paper strips made of the collected documents to create hand-made paper strips. In this later piece, I presented all the materials and techniques that I learned from exploring my professional identity (Figure 11).

**Figure 11**

*One of the bigger rug pieces discussed in May.*



#### **Hsiu-Chun's exploring materials as relationships:**

In this visual entry, I did not think too much about what pictures I wanted to draw. I instead picked up the materials after being inspired by the conversation with my participants, and explored what learning possibilities mixing color can bring. I also utilized scratching in this exploration, while thinking about techniques and materials creating a meaningful practice (Figure 12). Scratching could refer to the action of removing something to reveal original appearances.

**Figure 12**

*A journal entry: Relationships*

***Claire's Email Response***

Dear Hsiu-Chun:

Although new materialists have made the claim that diffraction is focused on differences, and reflection emphasizes sameness (Barad, 2007), at this moment, I perceive an 'interference' effect that is created by positioning myself in this reflexive moment and feeling various diffractive elements, which show our differences, floating throughout our conversational materials. As a transformative learning facilitator, I do not 100 percent agree that reflexivity is an action that is only 'focusing attention narrowly on the relationship between objects and their representations' (Barad, 2007: 86). In transformative learning, people are asked to reflect on their positions in particular situations but not only to find sameness (Mezirow, 2003). It also requires people to think about differences and consider if

any adjusted actions should be taken to show more possibilities. Only when the revised follow-up actions are undertaken can a transformation happen.

Transformation is a destination we expected to arrive at in this study through our arts-based conversations. We could only try a certain number of possibilities (or, as Barad might call them, 'apparatus'), understand the variables, and maybe try to control them to reflect on what we could do next so that we could be close to our current goals in teaching or learning. Your art journal entries perfectly detailed the intensity of your process when it came to looking for the diffractions in your research. You utilized many different media to produce your entries and connect the media with the meanings you wanted to express. For example, in the entry about scratching out the paint on the surface, you tried to think about how different media experiments can offer teachers or young students various perspectives with regard to approaching the same practice. It also presented another struggle that you have as an observer (an outsider of the classroom): Should you provide suggestions for teachers to improve and/or think about their lessons or not? Many of the teachers you are working with at this preschool are not art majors, and you, as an art education major, know what materials or methods might better trigger young children's learning. Your role at this school and your relationships with different teachers sometimes put you in an awkward position if you want to suggest anything for the teachers' improvements or even open conversations.

As you mentioned in your letter, no matter how well we know each other, we still hold many different perspectives and may not completely agree with each other. One thing we have always kept in mind is respecting each other's thoughts. This requires a lot of trust. We cannot build a 15-year relationship with everyone. Can we create the same level of trust with people who only work with us for six months or one year? Interestingly, I did not think about this before. I have to admit that I often project high expectations of myself onto students. For me, different education backgrounds between Western and Eastern systems also lead to differences in terms of learning expectations. The expectation gaps among different people might reduce communication effectiveness and delay the construction of relationships. [...] We became aware of diffraction patterns when we figured out why the differences, such as expectations, perspectives, reactions, etc., happened by reflexive means. Maybe I had to fade out/let go of some of my 'color' to 'fit in' with the culture?

We may need to be more patient with what we want to do because we need time to influence the people we are working with. Thinking about these different approaches to develop or maintain relationships is like making my 'art education rug.' The ongoing and changing results and the techniques I used would keep shaping the final appearance of the rug...

Your friend,  
Claire



## ***Hsiu-Chun's Email Response***

Hi dear Claire,

On the topic of 'how teachers use art in their teaching,' you criticized the usage of the grid method for realistic sketches, and I questioned the way that teachers use art supplements to only represent fixed thoughts. The two stories in our conversation pushed me to rethink the relationship between art and the things we want to express and use to influence the way that teachers teach through art. Talking about my experiences first, I have doubts about whether the words and the images are treated with the same meanings. That is, I always feel a little awkward when I find that a creation only functions as a supplementary illustration of certain thoughts. I sometimes question whether teachers only using graphic language in this way, limits the potential of that language. Therefore, I invited my teacher participants to work together with me to examine the relationship between graphic language and verbal language for further understanding.

In your story about how teachers use grids in a portrait lesson, it was interesting to look at the relationship between art and learning. My perspective is different from yours. During your sharing, you said to me that 'you may have another opinion about the grid usage, but it is my opinion to disagree with using the grid for realistic drawing.' In spite of our differing opinions, we did not offend each other's ideas when we talked about it. We could accept each other's points of view and present our unique perspectives at the same time. This provocation reminds me of my job as a supervisor. How can I create this kind of positive relationship between myself and my participants? Now I am pondering my thoughts about supervision, my role in working with other teachers, and teaching in general, including the Reggio Emilia approaches, as well as deconstructing and reconstructing those thoughts.

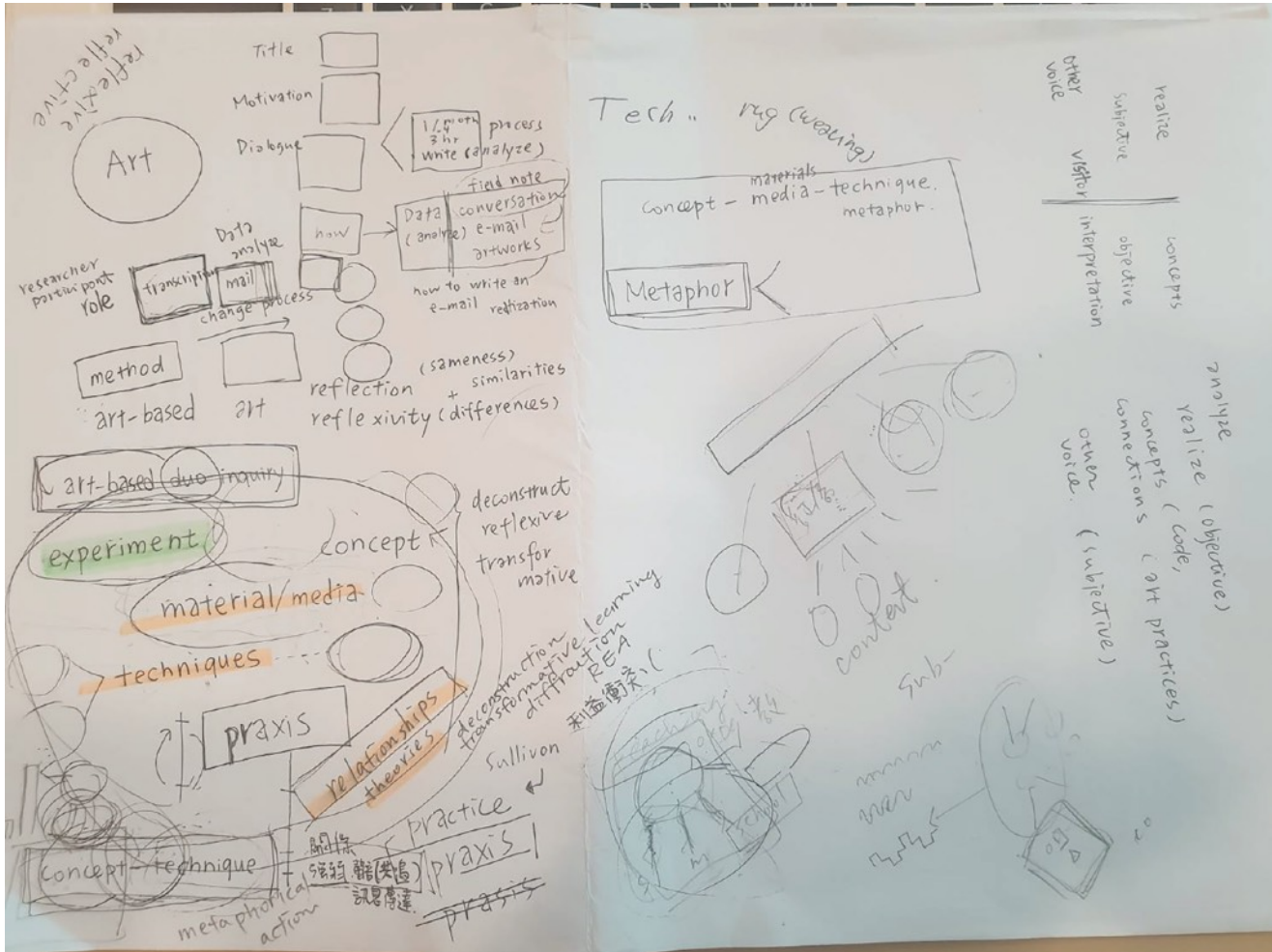
Second, regarding your amazing rugs, their evolution always caught my eye. Looking at your rug-weaving project, I am surprised that weaving creates a space for you to bring lots of things together, your experiences, your students, your identity, your feelings, your body, the techniques, the materials, your friendships, and more. Moreover, I think the ongoing experiments with both the materials and the techniques open up or offer numerous possibilities to review, reconsider, and transform your stories. Through the actions of weaving, the above elements come into an interplay of becoming your rugs.

Hope to see you soon,  
Hsiu-Chun

## Discussion

**Figure 13**

Second analysis: A sketch to present the research. (Claire and Hsiu-Chun).



### Claire

This was a new way for me to conduct arts-based research, even though we already did an arts-based duoethnography together. Reviewing our conversations and art creations (Figure 13), I would say that constructing relationships was a pivotal element during our transition to a different professional identity. We explored and tried to understand the differences among us, the people we interacted with, the new environment that we tried to adapt to, and the art methods and media that we wanted to incorporate. The discovery of differences and the analysis of the patterns we created in our behaviors or art gave me an understanding of the approach of ‘diffractive methodology’ (Barad, 2007:90). Our arts-based dialogues in this research created diffractive patterns because we experimented with various

different ways to investigate sameness, generate differences, and accept those differences. For instance, in my rug-making process, when I changed the poking lengths of the yarns, I created a different pattern on the art piece. At that moment, I also began to rethink the ways in which I interact with students. The diffractive methodology allowed me to negotiate with myself and create the space for deconstruction to happen. What do you think about this?

## Hsiu-Chun

We were inspired by the methodology because of our different perspectives, which led to our art practices incorporating various materials and techniques. As you say, we searched for differences to examine our professional identities in this study. These differences are particularly affirmative and productive, which differs from discovering through negation in dualism (Barad, 2007). It is not 'a difference in a system of separations and divisions' but a positive difference in 'a continuum and a multiplicity' (Hultman and Lenz Taguchi, 2010:529). By echoing McKay and Sappa's (2019) way of supporting identity development, we immersed ourselves in a space where we can trigger differences, especially positive ones.

To discover affirmative and productive differences, our inquiries are interwoven with diffractive relationships, including material engagements and our entangled conversations. I especially perceived our conversations to be entangled when we dealt with material impacts in our art practices. The pushing and pulling in your rug making is one of the examples in which I felt empowered by materials. In the process, I also connected my journal practices as a force pushing and pulling me to become a researcher. In this study, our diffractive relationships are built by our conversations and art explorations. These diffractive relationships supported us in (de)constructing our professional identities throughout this inquiry.

Our conversations with art explorations accompanied my professional growth while I was conducting doctoral research. I brought my doubts about doing research to art practices and to you. Our art practices and your different voice formed a safe and provocative space to shape my professional identity. This space allowed me to think forward, beyond, and in-between. Your different perspectives, including discourse and art pieces, encouraged me to discover my developing professional identity and the intersection of multiple perspectives. My identity as a doctoral researcher gripped by fear of failure and a lack of confidence regarding becoming independent was mediated by a transformative space that was filled with so many different encounters, provocations, and more.

## Claire

When I contemplated our practices, I saw a constant negotiation process in the way both of us approached our professional identity development. We both started interacting

with new people in our new workplaces with an established professional identity but learned to adjust ourselves and our performance to construct a new professional identity for the new positions. Derrida (2002:17) points out that negotiation 'must be adjusted to each case, to each moment without, however, the conclusion being a relativism or empiricism...negotiation cannot stop. One must always readjust.' According to Derridean thinking, we must keep shaping and deconstructing our professional identity and thus reforming our professional identities. In this study, we embedded our thoughts in art-making and learned more about our transitions and inquiries through the decision-making processes. Every analyzing phase allowed us to conduct the negotiation that is needed for deconstruction.

The transformation of our professional identities 'must always readjust' (Derrida, 2002:17) so that we can keep evolving and improving our professional practices. During the process of intersecting perspectives with you, your research, my teaching, and my identities, I realized that certain differences could be beneficial to my teaching. For example, I was thinking about fading out my Asian identity to better present my professional appearance, but then I wondered why I should do that. During the research process, I deconstructed my thoughts, and considered how my Asian identity could benefit my teaching. By showing and sharing my Asian identity and culture with students, our differences actually made us closer.

In a caring profession like ours, staying stable could be dangerous because it may result in rigidity and inflexibility during the teaching process. I can see how I formed the new professional identity as an assistant professor, but I do not think this will be the final look of this identity. Thank you for accompanying me on this journey.

## **Looking Back and Moving Forward**

This collaborative arts-based exploration of professional identity development was experimental and sought to encourage scholars to investigate this topic with similar flexibility in their approaches. Two pivotal elements stood out in our exploration: diffracting relationships and deconstructing perspectives and the ways in which they supported our growth and development. It is worth noting that this study did not propose any specific theories (neither Derrida nor Barad) as inquiry methods. Rather, we illustrated that, by thinking and sharing from different theoretical lenses, two scholars could work together and inspire each other to explore their own professional practices through the process of conducting arts-based explorations. Our research findings very much support those of McKay and Sappa (2019:33) because we did 'reflect differently, become differently, be differently, and do differently' We thought about giving a definition to the professional identities we developed through this research, but we could not in the end. We realized that professional development is a never-ending process. We will always seek to perceive the various challenges that present themselves on the way toward professional development and negotiate those challenges and ourselves. We will always deconstruct and refine our professional identities for further development.

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## ENDNOTES

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<sup>1</sup> See Gandini (2012) and Yang (2012) for the Reggio Emilia Approach and see Mezirow (2003) for Transformative Learning theory and its application in Chien (2018).

<sup>2</sup> Some discussion about how the author interprets Derrida's *différance* can be viewed in Chien (2018).