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Creative project assessment paper : the journey from roots to wings

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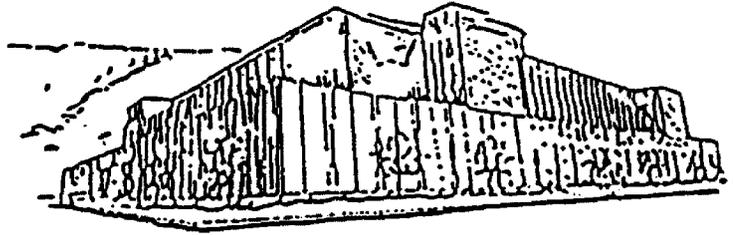
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CREATIVE PROJECT ASSESSMENT PAPER

'THE JOURNEY FROM ROOTS TO WINGS'

by

Susan Maria Seilstad

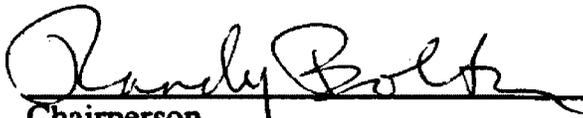
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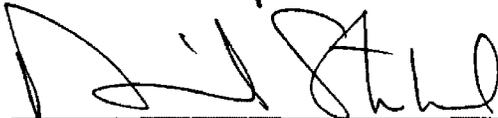
Master of Interdisciplinary Studies in Arts Education

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Susan Maria Seilstad

"Journey from Roots to Wings" (14 pp.)

Director: Dr. Randy Bolton



The Creative project incorporated qualitative research, teaching, and the artistic process to explore one's family history through embedded culture to make personal connections and meaning.

The genealogy research provided the foundation from which the author explored artistically the dimensions of family connections literally, poetically, and symbolically through the use of photography, poetry and sculpture. Thematic units were incorporated into the classroom exploring the student's embedded culture.

The author and her students learned through investigating themselves in relationship to their culture, present and past, that everything in life has a connection and the importance of art to express these connections and help make meaning.

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ORIGINAL PROPOSAL

The original focus of the study was exploration of specific turning points in relationship to the role of place in my development. They say that one's memory of place is most powerful when it is a carrier of emotionally charged events. What better place to begin exploring key events in life than with childhood memories. These memories revolved around special "wild places" in central Montana.

NEW FOCUS

The unexpected happened one weekend, early in September, at my parents home in Denton, Montana. Mom knew about my interest in children's nesting places and wondered if I might like reading a memoir written in 1853, by her Great Grandfather, James T. Johnston, one hundred years before I was born.

My focus was shifting; the more I read the more I desired to know. I had begun a genealogy search without realizing it. I spent the rest of that weekend at my parents home asking questions about their ancestors. I started to see my parents in a new light through the relationships of those who had shaped them.

To quote author Ben Michaelson: "Research will change you. It'll change your direction, your values, your attitudes, and your beliefs. Life is comfortable. Be prepared to have your life unsettled during research. It will take you where it wants to. It'll bring up new questions and teach you new lessons you need to learn."

I reviewed my original intent and decided to go with this new, strong passion about my family roots and the stories that made these "faceless people of my past"

come into focus and take shape in my mind.

RESTATEMENT OF INTENT

My new intent was to research my genealogy and learn the "family stories." I wanted to research past events to gain a clearer understanding of the present and a better prediction of future events. Although this search for one's roots focuses on historical records rather than on myths and superstitions, I decided to include both in my research.

BACKGROUND AND EXPERIENCE IN PREPARATION FOR THE PROJECT

Up until this point I had some basic knowledge of black and white photographic development. I had no formal training in this regard, but the students and I had explored some darkroom techniques.

During Christmas I hired the shop teacher, Jim Painter, to put a darkroom in the basement. The Chairman of our School Board, Judy Johnson, allowed me the use of their copy stand so I could make negatives of all the pictures various relatives loaned me.

As I had no prior experience in researching my genealogy, I used Jann Leppien's paper on *Stories Our Parents Told Us: An Introduction to Historical Research* as a guide.

I got the names, phone numbers, and addresses of various relatives from my parents who might be knowledgeable on past family history, and I borrowed old

photos and any other documents I could find.

I also contacted the Family History Library at the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints to arrange a day I could come in and research in their library and use their computer network.

A poem I wrote in February motivated the poetry book I later wrote. The background experience which prepared me for this was begun during the second summer session of the Creative Pulse Program, and continued in my field project during the following year writing poetry.

The summer session of 1994 we studied culture and I wrote a paper about my own family culture, which helped give me an understanding of how culture is learned, how it evolves with new experiences, and how it can be changed if one understands the dynamics of that learning process.

NEW APPROACH, METHODS, & PROCEDURES

GENEALOGY APPROACH

To gain an understanding of the past one must conduct a systematic and rigorous collection of information. Soon I had collected a huge amount of data from journals, family photo albums, letters, original documents such as land deeds and death certificates, and notes from interviewing relatives (in person and from phone interviews). I separated the four families I was researching into separate files and kept separate notebooks for each family along with interview notes. I learned quickly that I'd be less confused if I made my own version of my family tree and filled in the

names and dates I collected as I went along.

Interviewing became another important method to my genealogy research. The approach I finally developed for a successful interview was to focus on one aspect, event, or individual.

Closely tied to interviewing was the procedural approach of listening, observing, and perceiving. I began noting details, grasping main points or recurring themes and sequencing what I was learning. I became better at focusing on particulars, asking for clarification, and separating relevant from irrelevant.

I used advanced research materials through the Mormon Church library to see if any of their data on computer could assist my search.

I cross-referenced data collected and made note of discrepancies I had found. This became the area of my research where I used critical thinking skills by classifying, making interpretations, sequencing people and events, analyzing trends, patterns and relationships, and considering personal biases. I was then able to place content in relationship to the time period and embedded context of the ancestors studied.

PHOTOGRAPHY METHOD

My method in the photography portion of my creative project became quite simply trial and error. I had a good contact person for technical questions, but the bottom line was I simply needed to spend hours and hours in the darkroom learning to develop the old damaged photo's to the best of my ability.

SCULPTURAL PROCEDURE

My sculptural procedure was three part: 1.) original plaster cast of my body 2.) re-casting over original cast in light-weight media and reassembling the parts to make a whole 3.) the embellishment of the sculpture with the written mythology and design.

TEACHING APPROACH

I had not originally intended to incorporate my creative project into my teaching, but it happened. Soon I had a unit designed to learn more about who we are in relationship to our embedded context. My teaching approach was one of mentorship and honoring all that my students already knew and valued. I created the environment and stimulation for them to question, seek out answers, and artistically explore how to create from that power-center within themselves.

TIMELINE / SEQUENCE OF EVENTS

I gave myself four months to collect all the data I would need for the genealogy portion of my creative project. Then I figured two months to recopy and develop the photos I needed.

During this time I was collecting old family photos, documents, and recording the stories. The darkroom wasn't operational until the beginning of January, so the bulk of my hours spent in the darkroom were during the winter months.

My poetry book was composed during the month of April, and my sculpture

was created the latter part of April and into May.

May 10th I presented to the Sons of Norway, and my Graduate Show took place on May 16th in conjunction with our Spring Art Show at Lockwood Junior High. Earlier that same day I presented my "story" to the 6th graders from Lockwood (around 145 students).

WHAT HAPPENED-WHEN-FOR WHAT FELT REASONS

First I focused on discovering my ancestry to the fourth generation. Looking back it was uncanny how doors just kept opening up to me; every contact I made provided valuable information

Along with the basic information I was obtaining on my relatives, I started recording the stories that truly brought these people alive to me. Listening to these stories helped me to see connections that my past ancestors and I had in common. As I started piecing together their individual stories, I felt a kinship to them in spirit as well as blood. I am sure this knowledge indirectly lead me to the selection of photos I chose for the large wall unit I planned.

After the completion of the various wall units, I asked Brenda Rose, fellow graduate student of the Creative Pulse Program, to come over and view my work. We discussed a sculptural idea I had bouncing around in my head. She assured me I had indeed done enough without the sculpture and encouraged me to start writing my paper.

I began the introduction to my paper with a poem I had written about my

genealogy process. This poem led to another thought, and I found yet another old photo to accompany that thought on a new page. Before I knew it I had a poetic series of verses that told my story about my creative project process. I combined the verses and had a book printed entitled "Journey from Roots to Wings".

The sculpture originated during my first summer session at graduate school. I found myself sketching it one day during afternoon lecture. I had always envisioned "her" with uplifted wings and roots growing from the base of her legs. This completed sculpture embodied many layers of meaning; it brought resolution to my creative process.

Finally I enlarged the individual pages of my poetry book to 18" X 24" and mounted them to foamcore for additional strength. The seventeen large pages became a circular border around my sculpture. Since all my personal performances had in one way or another dealt with boundaries, it was only fitting that this poetic story would surround and enclose my mythical sculpture. Personal performance was a component of the Creative Pulse Program that helped the graduate students deal with issues and give these issues form and voice.

ACCOMPLISHMENTS

Studying my ancestral history has led me to a new level of awareness of who I am in connection with my roots. Reconstructing my past has also given me new insight into my family. I now have more information about the embedded context in which my parents were raised, thus helping to explain some of the biases and cultural

patterns they still have. I reached the realization that my ancestors were not perfect. They had dark sides and secrets like I do. Suddenly, I found myself bringing out of the closet past issues to examine in bright daylight, using the same nonjudgemental attitude for myself that I used when revisiting my ancestors.

I have also developed the skills of a good detective by exploring the clues at hand, developing the right line of questioning, recording and filing my findings, and relentlessly pursuing the investigation of my ancestry.

I was finally able to put into practice what the Creative Pulse has been theorizing for the last three years to me. I was able to bring more of who I am into my classroom. Together, the students and I developed the theme "Who are We," thus creating a framework by which we could better understand our culture. Many of our projects were a reflection of what we learned about ourselves. The students and I, learned more about personal identity and how to express it artistically.

EXPECTED / UNEXPECTED RESULTS

I had been warned how it takes a long time to gain all the information I was seeking in such a short time period, so I was pleased how doors opened up for me. It was wonderful how people I contacted followed through in such a timely manner and offered such helpful information.

I was surprised to have become so engaged in the research component of this project; I became a good detective.

I didn't expect to involve any creative writing in this project except to

document the stories I had been told.

I anticipated sharing some of what I was doing with my students, but I didn't plan such integration into my classroom.

To my surprise this creative project became a new found passion and a means to get me back in touch with my family.

I hadn't planned for this project to extend into the community, yet I joined Sons of Norway and became involved in learning about my Norwegian heritage and Viking mythology.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE PROJECT

I've gained a better understanding of the present by understanding and evaluating past events. Through this understanding came forgiveness, enlightenment, and renewed family ties. Having significant, relevant issues to be explored both in my art room and in my artist studio is what it's all about. Real learning burgeoned as I became personally engaged in the process.

TRANSFORMATION OF AN ARTIST / TEACHER

The act and process of being transformed can happen in a moments notice, but not for me. Mine started three years ago when I joined the Creative Pulse Program; it took many stages and different levels of awareness. I have been transformed as an artist -- an artist who feels she can express herself visually. I have become a teacher whose approach now "draws out" rather than "pours in." I've come to honor what

each student brings to my classroom and I no longer see myself the all-knowing teacher who graciously imparts this knowledge to her students. Rather, I let the students help design lessons that will personally empower them as I become the mentor.

I have this wonderful feeling of my roots reaching deep into the foundations of my life, and I feel grateful for the new growth that will help support and balance me in the future. As "Keeper of the Memories," I may now impart to future generations the opportunity to embrace the past or an integral part of the present and the future.

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