

# **Grappling with the realities of teaching: Artful representations as sense-making, meaning-making tools**

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## **ABSTRACT**

The work of the teacher is becoming progressively more ambiguous and demanding; and making sense of what it means to teach is an increasingly challenging task. This chapter presents a teacher's story to illustrate how creative, non-linear forms of representation such as visual imagery and writing, together with narrative reporting, were catalysts for revealing meanings for actions, and for eliciting the products and processes of reflection and self-awareness. These artful representations made visible the way conceptions of teaching and self-as-teacher were constructed and re-constructed. Attending to these ways of knowing highlighted possible strategies for dealing more intentionally with work demands. Such representations can be valuable resources for teachers, nourishing efforts to better understand what it means to teach and providing supportive scaffolding for making connections with the knowledge which guides action.

### **Changing contexts, changing expectations**

What does the new century hold for teachers and teachers' work? The teaching profession is recognising that future teachers will be expected to perform new roles to meet the challenging expectations of educational practice (Hargreaves, 1994). There is increasing acknowledgment that teaching is a multi-faceted endeavour and separating what is and what is not teachers' work is becoming increasingly difficult (Beattie, 1995; Hatch, 1999). The pace of social change means the work of the teacher is becoming progressively more ambiguous and demanding, with external forces strongly influencing what it means to teach (Rowan, 1994).

Attending to the experiences of teachers in everyday teaching situations, making teachers' work visible and recognisable, finding out who teachers are, what they do, and how they know is crucial to understanding the action world of contemporary teaching (Hatch, 1999; Rust, 1999).

The significance of teachers' ways of knowing and meaning-making efforts has been emphasised by those studying teaching and teachers' work (Ethell & McMeniman, 2000; Ghaith & Shaaban, 1999; Sumsion, 1997). If teachers are to be effective in adapting to and shaping the contexts in which they work, deliberate sense-making of the real world conditions and day-to-day realities that influence teaching as well as personal ways of knowing about teaching, is vital (Black, 2000; Black & Halliwell, 2000). This chapter gives support for identifying and critiquing personal conceptions of teaching and meanings, suggesting tools for getting in touch with ways of knowing and doing within contemporary teaching contexts.

### **Why artful representations?**

If researchers want to understand how teachers make sense of their work, then artistic forms of data representation that can grasp and reveal these not always definable emotions and ways of knowing may be valuable tools (Effron & Joseph, 1994). 'Alternative/artful forms of data representation' refers to those methods that support the articulation of teachers' experiences and which are not normally used in the educational research community to represent educational worlds, "...forms whose limits differ from those imposed by propositional discourse and number" (Eisner, 1997, p.5).

In this study a methodology focusing on 'artful representations' developed because of an interest in the relationship between forms of understanding and alternative forms of data representation (Eisner, 1993; Eisner, 1997). Methodological decisions were based on conceptions about the

nature of knowledge and the relationship between what a teacher knows and how this knowledge is represented. Interested in matters of meaning, and recognising the limits of some methods that are conventionally employed, artful representations of ‘drawing and metaphor’ were chosen as tools to provide windows into teachers’ experiences.

### **Teachers are meaning-makers who know in artful and aesthetic ways**

Teaching is situated within an individual’s identity and sense of meaning. The teacher is an active searcher and maker of meaning and meanings are embedded in what teachers do (Schmidt & Knowles, 1995). The materials of one’s life are essential to an understanding of one’s work, particularly when one’s life and work are concerned with education (Sumsion, 1997).

Teaching has been characterised as the way in which a teacher responds aesthetically to make meaning that is professionally significant; meaning that is deeply personal and invested with great emotion and feeling (Coldron & Smith, 1999). The way this meaning is created is characteristic of artistic expression and artistic discourse (McDonald, 1992). Research on teacher knowledge has shown that teachers often employ a type of thinking that expresses itself in aesthetic ways rather than linear prescriptions (Bullough & Stokes, 1994; Eisner, 1997; Weber & Mitchell, 1996). Consequently, non-linear forms of data representation such as visual imagery, drawing and metaphor, have great potential for revealing teacher knowledge and meanings and for eliciting reflection.

Teachers have knowledge in many forms. This knowledge is practical, personal, situated, and embodied in their actions (Clandinin, 1986; Elbaz, 1981). It is expressed by their stories and metaphors about teaching, organised by images, and embedded in and shaped by experiences past and present (Carter, 1993; Clandinin, 1992; Stremmel, Fu, Patet, & Shah, 1995). Teachers’ knowledge involves combinations of understanding, intuition, artistry, values, feelings and emotionality (Hargreaves, 1998; Sumsion, 1997). It is often tacit and therefore not easily accessible without guided and deliberate reflection (Roth, Masciotra, & Boyd, 1999). Practical understandings, personal experiences and tacit knowledge are powerful forces guiding teachers’ action but often go unexamined due to their abstract and illusive nature (Freppon & MacGillivray, 1996). Inquiry which supports the knowledge and language of teachers by using artful forms such as stories, drawings and metaphor is therefore extremely important (Carter, 1993; Sack, 1997; Weber & Mitchell, 1996).

Drawings are a useful tool for eliciting reflection, self-analysis and change (Sack, 1997). Drawings offer a glimpse into human sense-making - a different, deeper glimpse; a glimpse of the whole at a glance (Weber & Mitchell, 1996). They trigger memories and discussions about home-life, schooling, courses, philosophies and values, and support reflection and self-awareness (Sack, 1997). They bring to light nuances and ambivalences in teaching identities that might otherwise remain hidden, capturing the influences of past and present, and stereotypes and contradictions in teacher identity and practice (Weber & Mitchell, 1996). Drawings are immediately evocative, generating insights into ways of knowing that are implicit and held unconsciously.

Metaphor as a form of data representation was selected because metaphors are closely linked with teachers' views of teaching and learning, and are grounded in teachers' personal histories as learners and educators (Stofflett, 1996). Like drawing, metaphors reveal teachers' self-understandings (Bullough & Stokes, 1994). Metaphors about teaching and learning have been used to help teachers explore difficulties in the classroom, and to examine the influence of their beliefs and assumptions about teaching and learning on their practice (Dooley, 1998). It has been found that creating metaphors facilitates links between practical knowledge, theory and practice (Janesick, 1994).

### **Narrative methods and meaning-making**

In the larger study from which this chapter is drawn, fourteen early childhood teachers employed in child care centres engaged in cycles of reflective inquiry for a period of four months. As part of a professional development program we met on at least six occasions for two hours to discuss experiences and engage in reflective conversations and activities.

A narrative methodology united conversation and written reflection (i.e. life history writing and journal writing), and artful forms of metaphor and drawing. This encouraged teachers to make multiple probes into their ways of knowing about teaching and self-as-teacher; to examine the ambiguity, contradictions and competing imperatives characteristic of many everyday teaching situations; and to renegotiate relationships between self and context.

Using a variety of representations supported teachers' meaning-making and sense-making efforts by revealing and representing their tacit ways of knowing in different, dynamic and holistic ways. Visual information provided information at once, narrative telling and writing provided information over time, and metaphor and drawing contributed to understandings of relationships

by enabling the qualities of experiences to be seen, heard and felt (Eisner, 1993). Combined, these forms provided a collage of meaning, a layering and a weaving of knowledge, experience and action, and a means through which 'new' meaning could be made.

At the commencement of the program, teachers were asked to draw themselves as teacher and to engage in written reflection about how they represented 'teacher'. The drawing, writing and discussing of experiences enabled teachers to articulate meanings and unexamined tensions around their identity and teaching work. During the program the teachers returned to these meanings and representations to re-examine teaching experiences and dilemma situations. They examined connections between feelings, aspirations, past experiences, relationships and events, and considered how these had shaped and were shaping their teacher identities. As teachers refined early drawings and created a series of new pictures to portray new meanings and understandings, the ongoing nature of dilemmas surfaced. Metaphors were used by teachers to describe what their work was like and what being a teacher involved. These metaphors captured the experiential and changing dimensions of knowing, feelings and emotions, perceptions and previously unexplored tensions. A range of dissonant experiences and feelings were represented as teachers grappled with what it meant to teach.

Narrative accounts of teachers' sense-making were developed during the program. In this chapter, this is exemplified in Kim's account which follows her examination of self-as-teacher, her grappling with the tensions and realities of her teaching context and the challenges of conceptualising what it meant to teach. Artful representations enabled Kim to identify the interaction and relationship between herself and her teaching context. These representations helped her examine personal meanings leading to recognition that valued meanings had been lost in the demands of her work. Discussions with others and reflections on representations provided Kim with resources for understanding the dynamic, personal activity of what teaching meant for her and facilitated more intentional approaches for reconciling tensions, planning a better fit for herself as teacher in her workplace, and strategies for improving teaching practice.

#### **KIM: AN EVOLVING IMAGE OF TEACHER AS OLYMPIC GYMNAST**

Kim had been teaching for five years and this was the fourth child care centre in which she had worked. Her husband's work required frequent relocation between states and so Kim had moved with him, finding employment in a variety of centres. She was now working as a preschool teacher in a 53 place centre which had a director, an assistant director, and an administrator.

There were four age groups ranging from 0-5 years. The centre opened in 1976 and had some recent renovations. Kim had been the teacher in the preschool room for over a year.

The program gave Kim an opportunity to pause, to think about her practices and consider her teaching values. Representing her images of teaching enabled Kim to tune into her day-to-day teaching realities and her personal ways of knowing:

*I really liked reflecting on my images because it outlined how I really do feel about my work and what I am doing. I sort of knew that I didn't feel happy in my job. It just really hit home to me after reflecting on my images. I now know what I need, and what I need to do now.*

*It helped to clarify my roles, my feelings, my job – it was there, but I had never really thought about it. I had pushed it aside because I had too many other things to worry about.*

*Reflecting on my images gave me a chance to take a step back and really have a think. It has made me stop and think about what I am doing and why I am doing it. This is good.*

*At work I don't get the chance. At work it is all about the children, and the parents and the families, and the other staff. It was good to go back and really look at myself and how I am feeling. There are real benefits because now I can see how I am feeling and can think about how I can change that.*

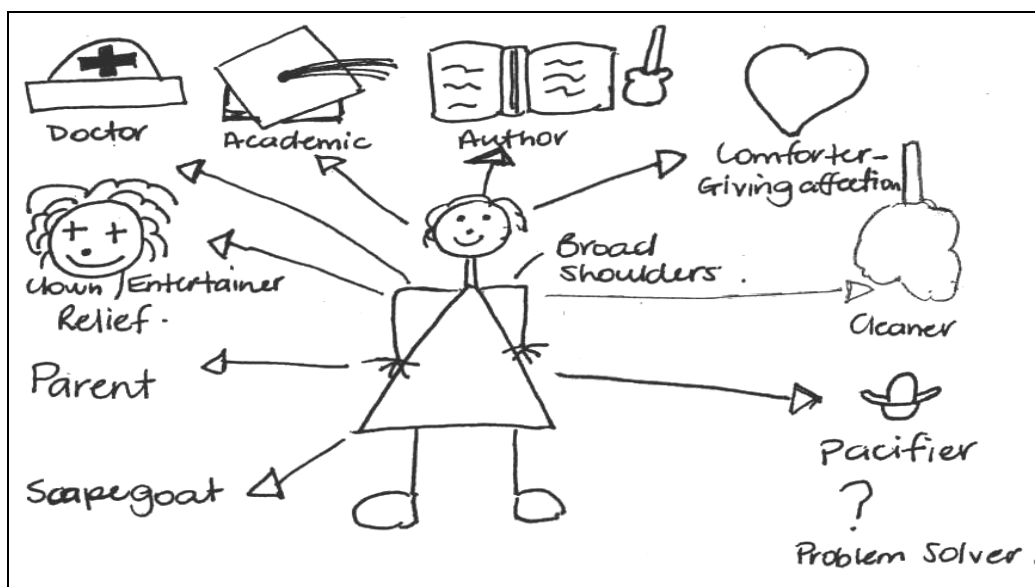
*I feel like I have gotten lost at work – I am working for everybody else. It has been good to reflect because it has brought ME back. I can see the things I need too. I have really taken my needs on board.*

*I have had a lot of demands on me and that came out in my drawings. I felt like I was a hundred people at once and I just can't be that all the time.*

*I have now taken a step back realising there are things that I have to do first. I can see that 'this' is more important than 'that', and 'this' is what I am going to do now.*

*I feel empowered and positive, I feel I am taking more control over what I am doing. I feel like I am doing the right thing.*

Kim's first drawing was of a teacher surrounded by pictures and words (see Figure 1). She drew herself with broad shoulders to metaphorically depict the scope and complexity of her work.



**Figure 1: Kim's first drawing**

Kim's drawing offered a glimpse of the many roles she engaged in to meet the expectations of educational practice in child care. Her drawing triggered the realisation that teaching was more than completing defined tasks at set times, more than pedagogy, more than stereotyped conceptions of teaching. When describing her drawing and conception of teaching to the group Kim explained:

*I feel like I'm one of the children in home corner most of the time. I feel like there are so many different things I have to do in the day. Some days I am a scapegoat and everyone wants to put the blame on me, so I have to take it and deal with it.*

*Some days I feel like a relief parent - some of the children are there longer than I am most days. They need a lot of affection. At the moment we are going through staff cutbacks because we are losing numbers - especially in my room. I get the children coming up from the room below me because their room is full, and to keep the numbers they put the children in with me. So some days I spend all day just comforting those children and not spending as much time with the children in my room that I'd like to.*

*Some days I feel like a clown or an entertainer. I seem to be a doctor too - someone is always falling over and scraping their knees, so you have to get bandaids*

*and soothe them. Some days I feel like an academic, trying to justify why my program is just as good as the preschool round the corner or the Creche and Kindergarten centre. Then author - writing newsletters, and signs for my room, trying to make up stories for the children to keep them interested.*

*Some days I am the comforter and need to give the children affection and show them that I care. I have to make the room inviting for the children and help them feel comfortable while they are with me.*

*Some days I feel like the cleaner, constantly cleaning up and wiping tables and mopping floors and sweeping up. Some days I am the pacifier - some days children come in and all they want to do is fight with each other and I have to separate them a hundred times and they still go back to each other.*

*Some days I am the problem solver- everybody has got a problem and they want me to give them advice. The only word for all that is 'flexible' - flexible as a person, as a leader, and flexible in routines.*

Metaphor helped Kim get in touch with her feelings of discord, with the contradictions in her teaching identity and practice. She described her tensions in terms of *a magic pudding*:

*Looking back at my images of myself as a teacher I realise I feel a lot of negativity and dissatisfaction with my job and my role as a teacher. I have been at the crossroads for maybe twelve months now and have been thinking about a change. I guess I never sat down and thought about just how much my job has been getting me down.*

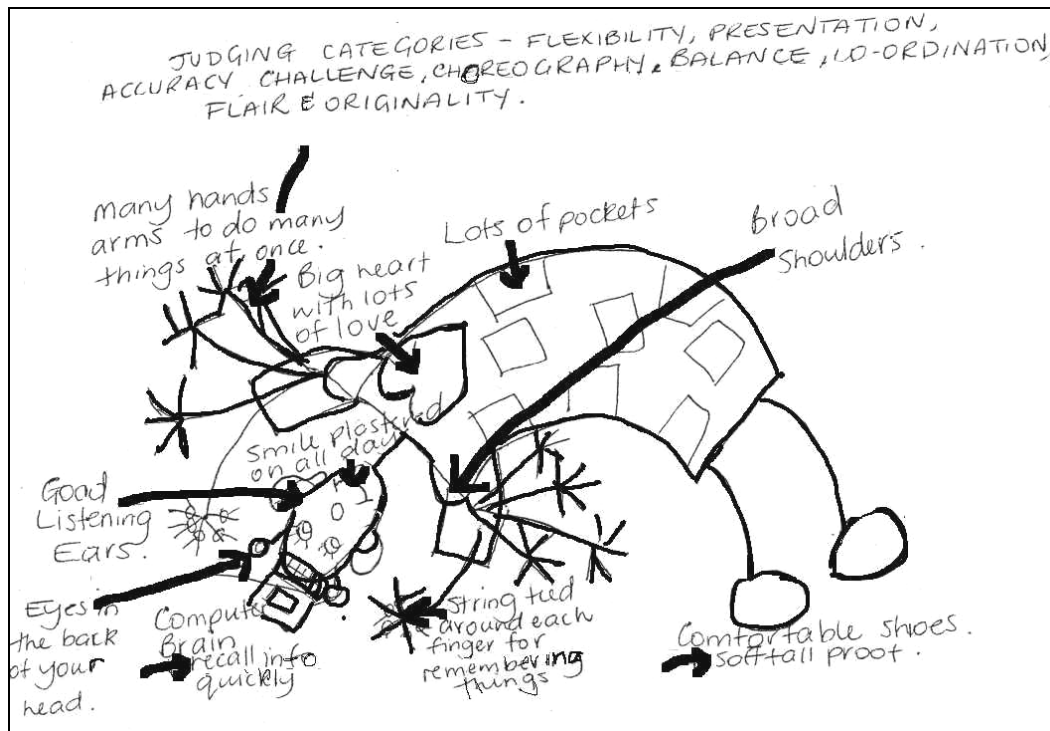
*I feel a bit like the 'Magic Pudding' from children's literature. People, staff, parents, management, and children, take pieces from me daily.*

*I then go home at night and am supposed to revitalise and regenerate so that I can go back again the next day ready for people to take more pieces out. I feel that I'm not getting enough back for myself.*

*There are rewards of course, like seeing children develop and grow, seeing children safe and secure in your care, and having children want to hug and kiss you. More often these are outweighed by staffing issues, cutbacks and so on, by parental attitudes that we are a babysitting service, and therefore undervalued as a profession, and by negative morale in the centre caused by centre mis-management.*



By the third discussion evening, Kim had changed her first drawing slightly but it still communicated the intensity and pressure of her work, the sense of having too much to do, the impact of the expectations of others (see Figure 2).



**Figure 2: Kim's second drawing**

Kim's drawing communicated her way of knowing and doing within the range of work demands she faced. It captured her sense that in order to cope with the realities of her work, she had to be an *Olympic gymnast*. During collaborative conversation, Kim shared why she developed her second drawing and what it represented:

*I changed my drawing a bit. Originally I did something similar (to Corinne) where I was wearing lots of different hats and had lots of different things that were pulling on me. I decided that in my work I feel like an Olympic gymnast.*

*There are certain criteria that I have to cover. People like the management, the accreditation council and the licensees are all like the judges. They judge me on things like being flexible, presenting well. We, as a centre, have to use flair and originality to make sure our centre is offering things that other centres aren't*

*offering. Co-ordination is required in relation to balancing the program, my needs, the children's needs, my goals in my room, the centre goals.*

*Even things like how you present your room, everybody is watching and making an opinion on that, on accuracy. I feel like I'm getting a score.*

Kim linked a second metaphor to her second drawing to delve further. A metaphor of *teaching as training for the Olympics*:

*Teaching is a long-term thing, you don't tend to go in for just a couple of weeks. Usually when you take on a group you try and stick with them for a year or more. It is ongoing and long term. Sometimes you reach the goals that you have set for yourself and sometimes you don't - just like an Olympic swimmer. I'm sure they set goals for themselves over a week or a month and they don't always achieve them, so they then have to re-evaluate their direction.*

*There are people who have expectations of you when you are a great athlete. You have to live up to them - just the same as a teacher - the parents of the children in my group have expectations of me, as does my director and my licensee. Everyone has expectations that I have to live up to.*

*Everything is not going to happen at once. Just like a swimmer's experience, they work up to a certain level and then have to taper off. This is similar to teaching.*

*Athletes have a definite routine, teachers do too. I have a definite routine where I am, and even though I am flexible within that routine there still has to be some sort of structure to the day. What happens each day is not necessarily predictable - I'm sure that is like training. Athletes get illness or injuries and that affects how well they train.*

*There are some metaphors, like 'teaching as gardening' which seem to me to only represent ideals. I really like the idea of the garden metaphor where you have the seed and you give it the right nutrients and it grows into a beautiful tree. But, I don't feel that that is how I am or how teaching is in the real world.*

*I feel that this is a goal to work towards and it is how I would like teaching to be, but because there are so many other things that impact on my day, and impact on my work, it just doesn't happen like this.*

Artful representations of drawing and metaphor brought Kim's knowledge, feelings and experiences into appraisable forms. Her representations depicted *a sense of being pulled in many directions, and always putting the needs of others' before my own*. Kim became aware of the reciprocal shaping and interaction between 'self and context' and the need to anchor her conceptions of what it meant to teach to the demands of her work.

Although Kim was aware before the program that she was unhappy in her work, having an opportunity to express these feelings, and seeing them emerge in representations enabled examination of why she had been feeling negative. Reflection on her representations offered perspective, reasons for the constant feelings of unhappiness, pinpointing issues to tackle. Rather than succumb to pressure and loss of teaching identity Kim now had information to help her make deliberate steps to change her experience of teaching. Her positive strategies included re-examining personal images and expectations of herself-as-teacher, determining teaching priorities, and attending to 'her' needs and goals. Devising an action plan helped Kim feel immediately better about her work demands. Kim realised that there were only so many things she could get done in a day and unrealistic goals to achieve everything at once or to revitalise overnight were not helpful. Her artful representations were having an impact. Kim established a personal agenda, and set manageable goals for her work, able to articulate what she wanted to achieve in her work and why.

Even though Kim said she 'sort of knew' how she was experiencing teaching, her representations helped her actively acknowledge teaching as tough, complex and demanding. Kim's conception of teaching wasn't as simple as tending a garden, teaching was gruelling, like training for the Olympics:

*I have really examined how I feel about what I am doing. This has been helpful in clarifying my goals and aims as a teacher and for my future. Teaching in child care is challenging in many ways.*

Kim's representations helped her focus on previously unexamined tensions. Metaphor and drawing presented dilemmas and tensions in recognisable forms - forms that emphasised connections between contextual factors and her teaching identity. Kim could see that she had been losing something of herself in her efforts to meet expectations. Kim's conceptions of teaching were being dominated by competing expectations and imperatives that she felt compelled to address.

As she made sense of her meaning-making Kim understood that experiencing feelings of discord and disharmony were part of being a teacher, part of making sense of what it means to teach. Kim realised that dilemmas would be ongoing and that she had held idealistic views of what teaching should be only to find that these didn't fit with her teaching reality. Rather than hold on to romantic tales of teaching, Kim listened to her teacher voice, re-examined her conceptions of teaching, and attended to the complexity of teaching. However, she did this with a greater awareness of the teacher she wanted to be, equipped with strategies for reflecting on and representing her experiential and aesthetic ways of knowing about her work.

Kim's account shows how picturing her work and herself-as-teacher using artful representations and examining connections between feelings, aspirations, past experiences, relationships and events provided the impetus needed to make 'new' meanings and begin balancing and reconciling inner tensions. Reflecting on her personal ways of knowing enabled her to focus on herself-as-teacher and give consideration to how her valued conceptions of teaching could be enacted. She began to locate herself in her work, to acknowledge work demands and expectations, and value her personal goals and priorities. More aware of how she could create a better fit for herself as teacher, Kim described feeling confident to take control and deal more purposefully with work demands.

It is acknowledged that these data represent only a fragment of Kim's experience; and that experiences are changeable and transient - they shift with the contexts and discourses in which teachers operate. 'Long-term' celebratory conclusions cannot be made. Even 'short-term' celebratory conclusions are identified as problematical by some critical theorists (Gore, 1991; Lather, 1998). The purpose of this chapter is not to make long-term claims about empowerment or emancipation, but rather to emphasise ways of supporting teachers' sense-making about their work, about themselves as teachers, and about the teachers they want to be. This chapter shows how artful tools such as drawing, and metaphor supported Kim's sense-making and the (re-) construction of her teaching identity. These resources have potential for helping other teachers to make new meaning, and to revise existing meanings as new events and experiences are added to their lives, and are useful methods that can become self-directing and self-sustaining ways of understanding complex, changing teaching contexts, and personal ways of knowing.

## **Implications**

Artful representations such as metaphor and drawing can be used to support teachers' explorations of their experiences and to help teachers address problems that have no definitive resolution. Such methods can explore teachers' own affective and experiential responses, their internal resources, their aesthetic ways of knowing, and their creative approaches to problem solving.

The purpose of using alternative forms of data representation within educational research is to illuminate meaning, to invite attention to complexity, to be evocative, to generate insight, to give a sense that what is being portrayed is real, and to increase the variety of questions that can be asked about the educational situations studied (Eisner, 1997).

Opportunities for student teachers and teachers to clarify and critique the personal theories they bring with them to teacher education and to teaching will assist their ways of knowing and understanding about what it means to be a teacher (Ethell & McMeniman, 2000).

Kim's account illustrates how feeling and responding to the dissonance of teaching realities, while also attending to personal meanings and knowledge, can make a difference to how teachers perceive and experience their work. Identifying and expressing personal ways of knowing can better equip teachers to anchor knowledge to the demands of the work, and divert their sense of being overwhelmed, burnt out and ineffective. Whilst the temporal nature of these benefits and outcomes must be acknowledged, the helpfulness of creative, non-linear forms of representation for making sense of teaching is clear. Used regularly, these resources can contribute to the strengthening and maintenance of teachers' shifting conceptions of what it means to teach within ever-changing workplaces, and with practice may produce more long-term results.

Artful representations assist sense-making by helping teachers get in touch with their emotions, ideas, intuition, and values in personal conceptions of teaching and learning. They have a capacity to bring knowledge into forms which communicate a teacher's way of knowing and doing within a whole range of work demands. As teachers consciously examine the knowledge they use, and bring this knowledge into their deliberations about teaching, they gain heightened understanding of themselves as teachers and how they respond to teaching situations. This is professionally valuable because it can provide the impetus for teachers to re-negotiate their relationships with their work environment and to develop more intentional teaching strategies.

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