



# Unpacking that damn! suitcase

Improving my practice as an artist, researcher, teacher and social being  
Lee Scott



## Background to the study

My study had a number of purposes. Firstly, it was to improve my practice as an artist, teacher, researcher and social being, through a critically reflective self study. Secondly, it was to design and produce a set of pictographic cards for use as creative prompts, which I have named 'PicTopics'. A pictograph or pictogram is described as a symbol representing a concept, object, activity, place or event through illustration. Pictograms are characterized by their simplified style, which omits all details that are unnecessary to the desired communication. I sought to validate the communication design aspect of the cards, their pertinence in the generation of story-telling, and their value both as a creative teaching tool and as 'a visual voice' to elicit and enable social commentary.

Thirdly, the purpose of this study was to record and reflect on the interactions between the PicTopics, my paintings and other aspects of creative practice, other users of the PicTopics, and my development as an individual, as artist, teacher, and social being. My study is about my ontogenesis, my 'becoming' to know myself and what really matters to me.

I consciously wanted to use simplified images in my research to find ways to foster the concept and creation of a 'visual voice'. This idea was inspired by previous favourable comments and interpretations by the public regarding the use of a pictographic style in the depiction of concepts and objects in my paintings.

## Research Questions

I asked myself the following research questions:

What is the value and role of the PicTopics in generating or communicating a story or message?

How are the PicTopics pertinent to my practice as an artist, researcher, teacher and social being?

How can I improve my practice in a critically reflective self-study, as an artist, researcher, teacher and social being using the PicTopics?

## The Value of the Research

I believe that one of the values of this research lies in how the development of the PicTopics inadvertently led me upon a path that ensured - through critical self-reflection - my intellectual and emotional growth. By examining my practice as an artist, researcher and teacher/practitioner, this study showed the significance of visual images as prompts or triggers to generating story content. It also showed the value of the PicTopic cards in helping to open channels of communication and dialogue between people, and lastly demonstrated the usefulness of the cards as a creative teaching tool.

I introduced the notion of 'living social theories' and 'living artistic theories' in the dissertation in addition to Whitehead's living educational theories.

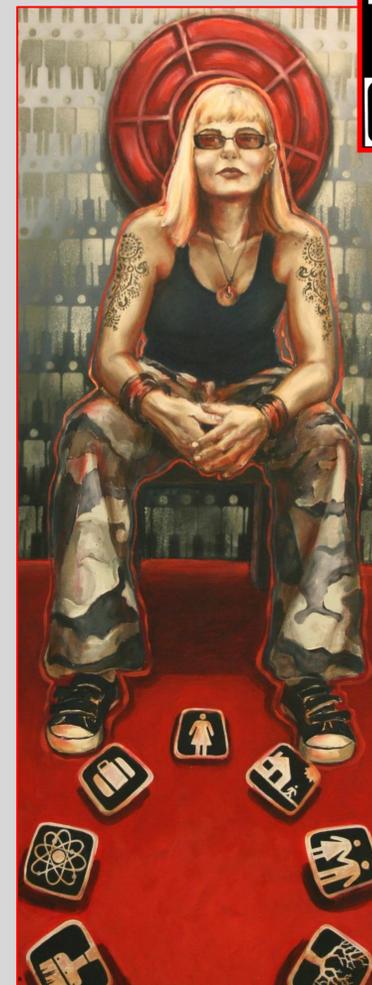
My conceptual framework explored the relationship of the values associated with fun, playing, creativity and well-being with my living theories. I sincerely believe that fun, playing, creativity and well-being aid in the educational growth of the individual.

## Methodology

My study was a qualitative and Arts-Based Research (ABR) critically reflective self-study where subjectivity, changeability and adaptability have been intrinsic elements in the knowledge-generation and meaning-making in the research.

Self-study in the form of living educational theories, combined with practice-based and practice-led research, and action research has allowed me to explore my own theories and has validated my theories on the importance of creative playfulness.

The PicTopics were pivotal in this study as they are both a methodological tool to gather stories, and evidence. The PicTopics are six centimetres square, and the images on them are black and white in a simple pictographic style. The cards function as creative prompts or triggers, and their impersonal quality allows people to feel comfortable while telling their stories.



- 'That damn! Suitcase'
- PicTopic cards representative of self and my values
- 'Self portrait as a storyteller - My Cards'

I remember choosing the 'suitcase' PicTopic card in the painting titled 'Self portrait as Storyteller' to symbolise my wish for a spiritual hearth and home. It was only much later after deep reflection that I was able to realise the 'pull' of the suitcase because of its continual re-appearance in my paintings.

## Discussion

I now see the suitcase as a metaphor for 'not belonging' and 'baggage' as in 'everyone has baggage', which, translated from the colloquial, means to me that all people carry their fears and experiences with them. These experiences generally colour their expectations and outlook on life. In my paintings, the metaphor of the suitcase is both figuratively visual but also profoundly literal.

In the self portrait, I chose to tell something about myself by portraying images or symbols that represent elements of me. The PicTopics are floating just above the surface of the ground laid out in an unfinished circle. The cards I chose were of 'a woman', 'a suitcase', 'an atom and electrons', 'a house painting brush', 'a house with a person walking away from it', an image of 'a couple holding hands' and 'a pair of lungs'. The woman image or pictograph is at the fore of the circular layout of PicTopics. There is a suitcase on my right and a house on my left. They represent for me the fact that I can never 'go home' having emigrated from Rhodesia and the desire to belong somewhere - to find hearth and home. The lungs represent the bush and my animist philosophies.

## Details: thesis, publications and multimedia narrative

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Thesis: can be accessed at: <http://www.actionresearch.net/living/leeall+picd.pdf>  
Articles: Time to play: My reflections on pictographic prompts and their potential use as a creative and educational tool. Educational Research for Social Change (ERSC) Vol: 1 no1, April 2012 pp.36-49. ersc.nmmu.ac.za  
"Digging deep": Self-study as a reflexive approach to improving my practice as an artist, researcher and teacher. Perspectives in Education (PIE) Vol 32 no32, June 2014  
YouTube: <https://youtu.be/YL5PHzp5xO8>

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Leavy, P. 2009. *Method meets Art. Arts-Based Research Practice*. New York: The Guildford Press.

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