FINDING 'THE POWER TO BELIEVE'
CREATING MULTI-MODEL TEXTS IN THE INTERMEDIATE CLASSROOM

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ABSTRACT

Offering children the opportunity to construct forms of self-expression - visually and through written language - increases their sense of themselves as active producers of their arts and literacy education rather than just passive consumers/readers of texts. This essay describes the process and some of the outcomes of our involvement in a collaborative project designed to support children's growth in the visual arts and creative writing through the development of their own photography and related narratives. An aim of this year-long in-school project was to recognize the diversity of the participants' social worlds, affirming their value and connection, through multi-literacies to their own efforts at constructing their identities (hooks, 1984, 2000). Students' initial resistance to self-expression (Elbow, 2000; Blair and Sanford, 2004)) was overcome through the support and affirmation from teachers and peers as they negotiated the difficult terrain of engagement with these creative practices (Peterson, 2008).

INTRODUCTION

On that warm June morning, the students at Royal Street School approached their work more seamlessly than on other mornings. They moved back and forth between the texts they had written and their photographic images with unexpected ease. When they tired of working with their words, we encouraged them to shift their gaze and their seats toward their photos and the layout of their individual magazine pages, now visible on the computer screen. The combination of these two modes of expression created a powerful force that excited and ultimately motivated the students to overcome barriers to their artistic and literacy development. This process of translating meaning from one mode to another also provided these young artists and authors the opportunity to see their work honored and reflected back to them. It led them to consider ways to edit, polish, and alter both their photographs and their related written pieces. In these moments, the computer screen was much more than a monitor: it was a mirror that allowed students to engage in generative and reflective thinking. In short, they were seeing new ways of seeing themselves. Several students took a few moments to recognise their 'reflection', but when it did come into focus, what they saw was their own potential. Their images came as a surprise; the powerfully transformative nature of that recognition surprised us too. Now that the students had seen themselves in this new light, we hoped they might be able to move through their own resistance toward accepting themselves as writers and artists – worthy of our efforts and worthy of their own commitment.

ROYAL STREET SCHOOL AND THE STUDENTS OF ROOM 7

Royal Street School was constructed at the start of the 20th century and is located near the centre of a small city North East of Toronto. This city faces many of the challenges of larger settings without the benefit of access to many of the resources found in urban locales such as Toronto or Montreal. With that said, this city is set on the edge of the Canadian Shield, offering access to wilderness, waterways and a sense of belonging to the Northern regions of Ontario. With deep red bricks and stone pillars, the original façade of Royal Street could be described as stately. The design once privileged 'orderly' teacher-centered practices and, therefore, it is likely little thought was given to the acoustic qualities of the wood, glass and plaster walls, the massively high ceilings or the creaky wooden floors. Today things are very different at Royal Street School. It has been transformed into a noisy, busy echo chamber, where modern voices – those of students and teachers alike – ring out and compete for space. The student body at Royal Street School is made up of two distinct communities. One portion of the student population is enrolled in the French immersion stream, which begins in junior kindergarten. The children in this immersion program are for the most part living in stable middle-class homes where parents and guardians are likely to have fairly positive relationships with formal learning environments – many are university educated, artists, authors and professionals. Teachers, parents and administrators all tacitly view the immersion students as more academically capable than those in the English stream. In both streams, there is more diversity in terms of class than of ethnicity though, currently, Royal Street School runs one of the city's only ESL elementary classrooms.

The children of Room 7 with whom we worked represented a cross section of students enrolled in the English stream at Royal Street School. In this class, there were students with quite sophisticated academic skills and those who required significant support, both academically and socially. They were a lively and clever bunch of students though suspensions and frequent absences were the norm. When the whole class was in attendance they numbered about 25 students between the ages of 12-14 years. They were bursting with energy and a strong

desire to be acknowledged. Oftentimes the students were non-compliant which we interpreted as a means of release for their energies as well as a desire to be recognised.

From the start, it was clear that working with this disparate group would be a challenge; however, their curiosity, inquisitiveness, excitement and even their resistance intrigued us. We entered their world with the goal of providing an enrichment project to support their academic and artistic development but we also had to prove it was a worthwhile undertaking for them. What we did not know at the start was how much this project would help them to see themselves and their place in the world in new ways.

BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY AND METHODOLOGY

Within pre-school and primary classrooms, interpreting pictures is often the starting point for developing spoken language, which in turn becomes the basis for the further development of reading and writing skills.

> *Unlike older students, schooled to adhere to the conventional boundaries between sign systems, young children turn reading and writing into multimodal events involving drawing, talking, singing, writing, and so on. Weaving together symbols of all kinds to represent and convey their meaning makes it possible for them successfully to orchestrate literacy events long before language alone can serve them (Siegal 1995, p. 457).*

In the context of literacy or arts instruction the rich interaction of these multiple sign systems, termed 'transmediation' by Charles Suhor (1984, p. 250), often diminishes once competence in reading and writing is established. As children move out of primary classrooms into the upper elementary grades, their learning becomes increasingly fragmented, with each mode of communication, or dimension of learning presented in greater isolation. Books for older children regularly lack the illustrations that they cherished in the earlier grades and the visual arts are usually taught separately, removed from any context except perhaps the rhythm of yearly seasons or holiday themes. In an effort to build literacy, language arts activities for these older elementary and intermediate students are often functional in nature, focusing directly on spelling, comprehension and building vocabulary and often leaving behind more creative, personally meaningful or integrated writing activities.

While we do not argue against the importance of mastering important literacy skills, approaches to learning that encourage 'transmediation, the process of translating meanings from one sign system (such as language) into another (such as pictorial representation)… promotes the kind of thinking that goes beyond the display of received meanings to the invention of new connections and meanings' (Seigal 1995, p. 456). Therefore, if older children are encouraged to continue their early childhood explorations characterised by fluid and natural movement between talk, their visual imagery, and their developing ability to write, all communicative powers might be enhanced (Dyson 1986; Fueyo 1992; Harste et al 1984; Hubbard 1989). In the context of this project, transmediation, helps to describe the process that we encouraged as we provided multiple opportunities for students to move from one mode of expression to another. Via their photographs, writing, and their dialogue, the children employed a range of communicative tools to express their thoughts and ideas about themselves and about the world in which they live.

Case study methods were adapted as an essential approach to this project. As Robert Yin argues, 'case study methods allows investigators to retain the holistic and meaningful characteristic of real life events' (2009, p. 4),

effectively focusing our efforts on the creative process of the students over their final products. And as case study methods spring from phenomenology, whereby the researchers must set aside judgment, bias, or preconceptions in order to best understand the experiences of participants in the study, their use further focused our attention on the students' processes (Moutakas 1994). Due to the hands-on and fluid nature of the project, we recognised the importance of such a stance; our research questions needed to be approached inductively with an awareness of philosophical assumptions about human experience, rather than social science theories, at the forefront. Therefore, we positioned ourselves as teacher/researchers, guided by Freire's (1970) model of action research that embodies a pedagogy of care (Noddings,1992, 2005; Shor 1992; Creswell 1998.). In other words, 'to be attentive is to listen, watch, and notice [and] suspend preoccupation with the self, focus the heart and mind on others, and monitor how others are faring' (Thompson 1995, p. 129). Toward that end, we worked collaboratively with students and teachers at Royal Street School over the course of two academic years. Throughout the project, we drew upon an arts-based approach to qualitative inquiry (Eisner 1992; Flinders & Eisner 1994) to guide our observations and fieldwork. Through a process of constant comparative analysis (Glaser & Strauss 1967, 1993) we endeavored to identify themes that emerge from the data, namely the written and visual work produced by students, our weekly field notes and interactions with them, as well as informal feedback from teachers and parents about the project. These themes then served to direct our discussions and analysis of the students' experiences and the outcomes of their engagement in the visual and written activities.

OUR PROCESS AND JOURNEY

Work with the students from Royal Street School began in early April 2007 and continued for more than a year. In this paper we discuss the results of the first two phases of the project. Phase I ran April-June 2007, culminating in the publication of a class magazine (every student received a bound copy) and Phase II ran from September – December 2007 ending with a public exhibition of the students' photos and writing pieces. Throughout, we came into their classroom twice a week for approximately 90 minutes per session. This was a significant amount of time to devote to the project; however, it was our feeling that the students would achieve the most positive results with a concentrated, regular block of time to pursue the activities we facilitated. Fortunately, we were supported by the classroom teacher in this regard. We began by providing each student with a new 35mm point and shoot camera and a roll of 24-exposure colour film. These materials were assigned to students along with a *Camera Care Contract* outlining their responsibilities for the use and maintenance of the cameras. One of the remarkable aspects of working with this group was their obvious appreciation for the materials provided. Most students took great care to ensure the cameras and journals did not go missing or get damaged. We also laid out our expectations and took every opportunity to remind them of our commitment to their learning.

Phase I began with teaching the group how to use their cameras. This included very basic demonstrations on loading and unloading film, reading and understanding all electronic displays and working with the flash, as well as how to correctly hold the camera while shooting. Early on, a conscious decision was made to provide the children with traditional film rather than digital cameras. We believed that digital images would be too ephemeral, too fast and familiar. Additionally, reasonably priced film cameras, although they are getting more and more difficult to locate, still produce better images than similarly prices digital cameras. Initially, it was challenging to get the children to slow down and to look carefully through the viewfinder, as they were far more comfortable with the typical fold-out displays common on most digital cameras. However, with a finite number of frames available on each roll of film, the students quickly realised that in order to make quality images, they had to take time to carefully consider and compose each frame. To ensure there was a digital version of each image, their photos

were saved to CD at the time of processing. Having both traditional and digital photographs provided the most flexibility when it came to viewing and output, making PowerPoint presentations, and made simple desktop publishing possible. Each week, when we returned to Royal Street School with a new set of their prints in hand, it was as if each photo-finishing envelope held a tremendous surprise – a gift that inspired them to critique and analyze each photographic image for its aesthetic and technical merits.

In tandem with providing the cameras, students also received a hardcover writing journal, which was theirs to keep and theirs to share only if they wished. These journals had lined pages with clear pockets in the back and front, perfect for storing their 4x6 prints. The first activities were focused on making the journals their own. Students were then introduced to some simple poetic forms, including inference poems and haiku, and asked to try them. Eventually, they were provided with themes to guide their image-making and writing activities. The theme of *Self-Portrait* was the starting point, moving from an exploration of self, to home/family and onto community/environment.

It was hoped that themes would provide a structure for students to work within and move forward from. What we learned quite quickly was that most students were not ready for even a skeleton structure and that their need to resist was powerful and pushed some of our objectives to the side, at least for a time. To encourage the students to develop a genuine interest in the techniques and approaches offered, they were encouraged to represent their worlds in ways that made sense to them while always ensuring that they clearly understood our expectations about their commitment to the project.

For many of the girls in the group this meant using their journals as personal diaries full of detailed and emotionally charged entries shared reluctantly, at least at first even among their other female classmates. Most of the boys' initial efforts at writing were minimal and it took several weeks for many to complete their first roll of 24 frames. For the most part, their initial images were shots of friends mugging for the camera. These first photographs were taken in the classroom or on school grounds; snapshots of friends and peers in yearbook-like poses, illustrating friendship, connection and their comfort with one another. In these first images, many of the students paid little attention to composition, viewpoint, lighting, or to other aesthetic elements introduced in our first few sessions together. In our weekly sharing sessions, discussions about their images and writing were handled with seriousness, and then we carefully pointed out to them, one-on-one, the qualities of their visual compositions or written narratives that stood out. This was important for all the children, and especially so for those not used to being praised for their work. And even so, there were days when things didn't go well. This process was time consuming but, eventually, there was evidence of relationship-building in their interactions and their levels of engagement. In retrospect, the time spent and the flexibility provided was integral to future successes.

In order to acknowledge their needs, our own process of teaching became organic. If we arrived to find the group unable to focus their attention, they were divided into smaller working groups. If they seemed more attentive, a poem or short narrative might be read as encouragement for them to share their writing with the whole class. PowerPoint presentations of photographic imagery, both their own and professional work were also used to engage. Students especially loved to view their own photographic images large on the screen and this would stimulate conversation and allow them to practice respectful approaches to critique; in some cases this dialogue led to the creation of written texts to accompany their images. Students so enjoyed seeing their work in a professional format; they were surprised by its quality and how it could be positively critiqued by their classmates. This fluid flexible structure runs counter to much beginner level programming, where open-ended activities are

reserved for more experienced or advanced students. Just the opposite worked best for the students at Royal Street School. By starting with a very self-directed approach, the students were empowered to build individual pathways to engagement.

As students became more comfortable and learned how to become more articulate, supportive, critics of their classmates' work, their desire to take risks also developed. When a more caring and productive atmosphere began to established itself as part of the weekly routine (Noddings 1992, 2005; Thompson 1995), students were able to take-on the increasingly challenging task of exploring the more complex theme of *transformation* as part of the second phase of the project. This final phase of the project was to culminate in an exhibition of their work at the city's public art gallery in late autumn. It is important to note that students began to work with more determination when they realised just how professional the publication and exhibition of their photographs and writing could be. Their sense of their own literacy and image making potentials began to expand and take root as a result of this 'more worldly transaction between text and reader' (Elbow 2000, p. 33).

In preparation for the exhibition students reviewed the photographs and writing they had created through the first phase of the project. If they were pleased with the results, especially with regard to their photographs, they selected one image to use as a catalyst for their next, and hopefully, more sophisticated writing activities. Alternatively, if they felt that they lacked high quality images to choose from, they were given another roll of film and sent off to bring back the best photographs possible. Most of the students chose to shoot at least one additional roll of film that fall. Many were inspired to do so in part by the magnificence of the autumn light and color. If their new photographs did not include at least one outstanding image, in terms of technical quality and composition, as well as its subject matter, they were urged to try again. No limit was put on the number of rolls of film a student might use. With some experience under their belts, students were clearly more willing to consider and discuss the metaphorical, descriptive and narrative aspects of their photographs and when they wrote, they were more willing to carefully revise. This transformation played out in different and significant ways among groups of individual students in the class.

TRANSFORMATION: STORIES OF EXPERIENCE

The following descriptions are of groupings which emerged as we worked alongside students through many months of regular weekly contact. Visual and written observations, along with the work produced by the children, form the basis for these 'stories of experience.' They are, in short, the stuff of real life, descriptions of daily interactions in all their complexity and occasional ambiguity which underscore the value of a case study approach to such a research endeavor (Yin 2009).

### The Boys At The Back Of The Room

The students of Room 7 consisted of an array of young people with a wide ranging mix of personalities, interests and behaviors and, although there were many very boisterous characters, there was a contingent of boys who did everything they could to blend into the woodwork. Loud outbursts, tiffs, teasing, and small-scale chaos on the part of their classmates regularly contrasted with their sleepy calm and extreme reserve. Trying to share the technical aspects of using a camera, along with the important aesthetic considerations that go into making photographs, such as composition, lighting, point of view, etc., in conjunction with asking them to consider literary

concepts crucial to their poetic writing proved challenging. This atmosphere made it easier to overlook these boys. They were quiet and generally polite, but they did not participate, displaying their resistance through passivity (Fried 2001). Week after week, they returned to class with empty journals and unexposed film in their cameras. About mid-way through the program and after several weeks of urging, each of them finally arrived with roles of film near completion and journals that contained a few sentences in draft form. Like many of the other students, they had resisted the more formal writing activities initially presented; however, unlike many of their peers, they did not take ownership of their journals or their writing activities and pursued their roles as spectators rather than players (Fried 2001). They seemed to simply ignore the process and any form of encouragement. Nearing the end of the first ten weeks with them, and well on our way to publishing the students' magazine, these boys still did not have any work to contribute. Despite efforts to guide, support and encourage, their resistance was powerful. It constituted a serious form of opposition and a real challenge to us as teachers. How were they to learn when they refused to engage? Elbow's (2000) research into resistance and compliance in relation to school writing and the writing process provided us a way of making sense of the students' moments of transformation. He argues that the struggle from initial resistance and later to compliance experienced by these boys produces a strong bond of affection for their writing and image-making.

> *I think my teaching benefits when I recognize that I am faced with conflicting goals: helping students to find ways to comply (with the act of writing) but still maintain their independence and autonomy; and ways to resist, yet still be productive. We can't remove the conflict but at least we can understand it. (Elbow 2000, p. 22)*

This 'hopeful' theory of teaching guided us as we worked with these resistant boys. It was after they received their first and only set of photographic prints, which in all cases depicted objects, places and people who were important to each of them, that these boys awoke out of their sleepy silence and summoned the energy to take part. For Carl, it was his trip to Niagara Falls. Captured on film were the glowing brightly coloured neon lights of the Niagara Falls' 'midway'. For Charlie, it was a series of photographs made at his 13th birthday celebration. Though they were gentle images of the birthday boy with his homemade cake – innocent and childlike – these photos helped him to articulate/recognise his movement from childhood into his teenage years and the conflict inherent in that transition.

For Michael, who was perhaps the most withdrawn, it was a simple photograph of a video game box, entitled *The Legend of Zelda* that did the trick.
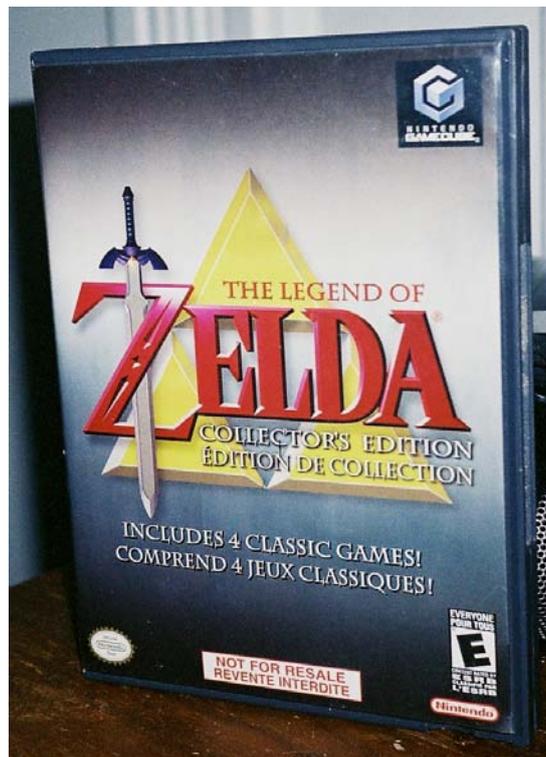
The Feel Of Victory

Video games are fun.
I like the feel of victory.
I like defeating enemies.
I like killing monsters that are evil.
I love the thrill of victory.

by Michael

Being a Teenager

Here I am holding my 13th birthday cake.
I like being 13 because it makes me a teenager.
Being 13 makes me feel bigger and more mature.
Even though I don't act mature,
I also don't feel like a little kid anymore.

by Charlie

His expertise and extensive knowledge of this game gave him a subject that he felt confident and comfortable sharing; something about himself that he was willing to expose. For all three of these boys, working directly from their photographic images was imperative and led them to talk more openly and then to write directly from their visual texts. This process was heightened by the one-to-one attention that our small group work allowed. The transformative power of seeing their photographic work formatted, cleaned up and presented through the tool of the computer was key and, after much discussion, the words did come. They were modest attempts but, for these individuals, a triumph. They took on a risky venture and were rewarded.

The Girls At The Front Of The Room

In contrast to the invisible boys, this group was comprised of talkative girls who took up the opportunity to write with intensity. During, but particularly in between sessions, they wrote voraciously; their journals imprinted with the weight of their emotions and their longing to be loved and appreciated. Quickly finishing up their initial rolls of film, they arrived each week with pages of 'stream of consciousness' writing that they carefully guarded from

view. They were asked to share, but we respected their willingness not to do so. After about five weeks with us, one of the girls finally handed in her photos and journal for us to read. They were returned with editorial comments and connected questions written on removable sticky notes. As Elbow offers, 'It is a mark of respect to students when we take *what* they write seriously enough to reply with our thoughts on the topic – instead of just making metacomments about how well they have written' (2000, p. 31). It was gratifying that these notes became cherished documents in themselves and sparked the confidence among the others to hand in their journals for feedback. This was a welcome sign of the emergence of a trusting community (Noddings 1992).

Early on, Anna and Cathy, two of the most openly emotional girls in this group collaborated on a series of photos reminiscent of B Grade horror film stills, hinting at violence, clearly designed to shock. Considering whether to discuss them as part of our weekly viewing sessions posed challenges, the most obvious being issues of censorship. The other was the more subtle but equally vexing problem of whether to invalidate the girls' initial efforts. In the end, it was decided to include the most benign photos in the series and to acknowledge their aesthetic value, making an effort to connect them to the traditions of image making explored by contemporary photographic artists such as Cindy Sherman (*For more information on Cindy Sherman's photographic work see www.temple.edu/photo/photographers/cindy/film/sherman.htm*). In the end, the young photographers' efforts were affirmed and their resistance acknowledged. This approach allowed the students to feel ownership over the artistic process and indicated respect for their choices. Both Anna and Cathy eventually abandoned these efforts and developed more authentic connections to their photos and writing pieces. Anna wrote and revised three separate pieces all related to a beautifully composed photo of an alleyway near her home. Instead of interpreting the image negatively or filtering it through borrowed and clichéd notions of darkness and evil, she wrote affectionately and powerfully about the alleyway's puddles and dilapidated fences, celebrating beauty often overlooked. When the piece was read out to the group, she smiled with a kind of pride not seen before.

Life…

I see plants, I see grass, houses, fences, cars.

all a part of our life,

all a part of our environment,

all a part of my walk to school.

This is…life!

Fences…

They guard the yard within.

Make people feel safe and unexposed.

They come in many sizes.

They are used to defend against trespassers,

…Fences!

Puddles…

Puddles are fun!

Puddles are almost everywhere.

For the world is not flat, but very bumpy.

Bumpy enough for PUDDLES!

By Anna

As well, Trisha was a student with great intelligence and a keen interest in the arts. From the outset she was engaged and thoughtful about her writing and interested in creating well composed and emotionally charged imagery. She wrote often and fulsomely, but it took her a long time to accept editorial support. In the end, through time spent and support given, Trisha was eventually able to step back, critique her own work and value the guidance offered.

A Mark Irreversible

My very first true love.
A mark carved deep down inside me.
The slow yet cannibalistic time
eating away, leaving nothing but a faint memory.

Our love, my love
With you I will stay forever.
A mark irreversible.

by Trisha

It is important to note that during our time together, Trisha applied to the visual arts stream at the local high school for the arts. Her mother shared that the enrichment project was a crucial part of the process, ending in her acceptance to the program the following year.

RELUCTANT TO WRITE: LEARNERS IN THE MIDDLE

This group of boys and girls found writing a painful if not impossible endeavor. Several have learning challenges, others, behavioral issues, and for some, the issue was body image or extremely difficult home lives complicating their school experiences. In dramatic contrast to the quiet boys, resistance for these individuals manifested itself in the form of inappropriate behavior and conflict. At the same time, many evinced a preternatural understanding of the challenges in their lives. However, their response to these complexities was to accomplish very little. If their energies could be harnessed, it was clear they could accomplish a great deal both towards improving their writing skills and their self-esteem.

To work towards these goals they were invited to take on leadership roles in the project – a proven approach to increased student engagement (Shor 1992; Hooks 1984). For example, one of these students supplied the cover image for the group's magazine and another headed up one of the magazine design teams responsible for the layout of the magazine. It was this group who also came up with the title, *The Power to Believe,* for the magazine and, later, the exhibit. One of this group's images was also chosen for the exhibition brochure and invitation.

Casey was one of the most challenged writers in this group; his self-esteem had clearly been eroded by the construction of himself as an academic failure. To cope, Casey adopted the persona of the 'goofy guy'. He was so down on himself that he would respond negatively to almost all of his photographs and written work. To help him produce written work of which he was proud, the short, sharp haiku form was utilised and he selected a beautiful and sensitive image of his pet rabbit. Casey's sense of accomplishment was an important step in beginning to seeing himself as someone capable of school success.

The Beast

It may have rust; it may be cracked.

It may look old, but it won't break down!

It's a Chev, but it can still go!

It can cut through rain and even snow.

It's one tough truck, oh yes indeed,

And, boy oh boy, can it speed!

by Isaac

Isaac, an outspoken and energetic boy, shared a story that illustrated another constructive outcome of our collaboration. Isaac had such enthusiasm for the photographic component of this project that he took it upon himself to look up Ryerson University's Imaging Arts Program on-line, write them an email, and include a selection of his photographs. Isaac shared this information with us after he received a note back from Ryerson indicating that he did indeed have talent and suggesting that he apply to the program when he was old enough to do so. For Isaac, this was an outstanding endorsement of his potential and, for us, powerful evidence of the impact the project was having for even the most resistant students.(See Figure VI & related text) (*Ryerson is a post secondary institution in Toronto, Canada, specialising in several well-respected arts and media related programs. For more information visit* www.ryerson.ca/home.html)

MOVING FORWARD: OUT OF THE SCHOOL AND INTO THE COMMUNITY

The focus of Phase II of the program, which began in the fall of 2007, was the preparation of a set of twenty-four photographs and related pieces of writing for the exhibition at the city's art gallery. Fortuitously, most of our group had been placed in a new class together that fall with an energetic teacher who truly supported the continuation of our project. The promise of a public exhibition – with a gallery opening where other artists, friends and family could view their work – motivated the students to further break through their fears and resistance. The idea of moving their work outside the school and into the larger community was empowering, helping them recognise and celebrate their worthiness (Fried 2000).

September and October were spent selecting photographs and polishing writing, focusing on the theme of transformation. The students worked hard to revise and polish their written pieces, mostly poems or short narratives, in small group sessions, engaging in discussions about imagery and symbolism, dictionary and thesaurus in hand. Exhibition images were enlarged to 11x14 inches and professionally mounted and matted. Their finished written pieces were formatted and printed on cardstock and both were arranged and hung by the gallery's exhibit curator in a very professional manner. Scheduled to open in November, the exhibit was promoted on the gallery and school websites, through a beautifully produced and professionally printed brochure, and in the school newsletter and city newspaper. The gallery also had invitations professionally printed for the parents and friends of the students and their teacher was instrumental in preparing the students for the event. She talked to them about what would happen at an exhibition opening and what would be expected of them. Along with the educational director at the gallery, we worked to ensure the opening was a very special event; this included organising refreshments, hiring a musician (a recent graduate from Royal Street who plays the violin), and making sure that everything was in place so that the children's work was in the spotlight.

The turnout for the event was outstanding; the gallery's director stating it was one of the largest crowds for any opening. Students arrived dressed up, along with family members and friends, full of anticipation. The gallery was buzzing with excitement, and a new community of visitors, many whom had never stepped through the door of this cultural institution. For the children and their families, this was a bridge-building event that helped to make the gallery a more accessible and inviting place for them; a place they may well visit in the future. Observing the children as they shared their work, it was clear that this was a meaningful moment for them, perhaps one that would help to sustain them as they faced the challenges, excitement, and uncertainty of moving on to high school. For us as researchers, it was the culmination many years of thought as to how to offer children ways to construct forms of self-expression – visually and through written language – in ways that increase their sense of themselves as active producers of their visual and literacy education.

To gather tangible evidence of the public's response to the exhibition, a guest/comment book was left on site throughout the two months the show was on display. Many visitors wrote thoughtful comments that were compiled into a booklet and presented to students at the end of our project. When cataloging the notes and comments left behind we found a message written by one of the students. Claire's words are a moving endorsement of the transformative capacity of this project – the ability of multi-modal literacy activities to truly engage students. For her, words and photos became potent tools for self-expression; meaningful and powerful ways to recognise herself and to be recognised.

I really enjoyed the time we spent.

The memories we shared and the great times we had.

It's so wonderful to be able to look at our work.

And think back to the time we spent on it.

It makes me proud to see the way all our work looks so professional.

The work we did.

The memories we had.

The times we shared.

Through good times and bad.

It's great to see the process that came to be.

Thank you so much.

by Claire written in the Art Gallery Exhibition Comment Book

The positive results of this project and other similar initiatives provide tangible evidence of the value and purpose of encouraging intermediate level students to move between visual imagery and written texts. The combination of these two modes of expression creates a powerful force that has the potential to build confidence, and ultimately to motivate students to move past barriers to their learning in the arts and literacy. This process of translating meaning from one form of expression to another helps to provide young people with the support they require in several communicative domains and can empower them to explore new and richer forms of expression; to edit, polish and alter their work, devoting the time necessary to craft their art and their communication practices. Although this approach is by no means groundbreaking, especially within the primary school years, it is often given short shrift in the context of the ever-increasing emphasis on standardisation and systematised approaches to education. These methods seem to negate the highly interdisciplinary nature of present-day literacy, especially for youth who spend countless hours communicating via Facebook and other online venues. If students are encourage to capitalise on their early experiences of image and text together, in conjunction with their rich understanding of inherently multi-modal digital on-line communication practices, the potential for them to recognise themselves as expressive, confident and competent communicators becomes ever more possible.

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