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Cultivating Aesthetic Practice for 21st Century Learning: Arts-Based Literacy as Critical Inquiry

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Abstract
This study is about art, literacy, and adolescents. It addresses a need for research that studies and theorizes arts-based learning for adolescents from sociocultural and critical perspectives, and a need for empirical research on the intersections among the arts, aesthetics, and critical literacy practice. Through participatory inquiry, I explore how arts-based literacy was taken up and understood by students over the course of one school year in two English classes in an arts-based high school. Through sociocultural critical literacy and aesthetic frameworks, I study how art was positioned and engaged in these classes and what this work meant to the teachers and students. Using ethnographic and qualitative methods, I study and theorize this work with and alongside teachers and students.

The study analyzes how arts-based learning here meant art as an epistemology, a way of knowing, but it also meant the cultivation of an aesthetic practice, a way of doing, that was nurtured in ongoing ways through invented pedagogical design. In the study, I describe and analyze three domains of this aesthetic practice. Through the positioning of art as story, students came to see their lives as works of art; they learned to resist single stories, cultivate an anti-deterministic stance, and build agentive identities. Students used art as a theoretical instrument for world sense-making; they used art to theorize, inquire, and engage in the social imagination, positioning them as knowledge generators versus passive receivers. Using the relational space of art as a terrain for mapping diverse experience, students engaged in dialogue and came to understand compassion as a mode of critical inquiry and collective action.

The teacher and student voices about what engages their hearts and minds, have implications for pedagogy, policy, and research related to the intersections between the arts and adolescent literacy in 21st century learning. The research shows ways that an aesthetic practice that required uncertainty, openness, and relational identity-building enhanced the goals of critical inquiry. Finally, the study makes an argument for the role of aesthetics in critical literacy education, a topic that has been largely absent from mainstream discourses on policy and practice.

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CULTIVATING AESTHETIC PRACTICE FOR 21ST CENTURY LEARNING: ARTS-BASED LITERACY AS CRITICAL INQUIRY

Jessica Whitelaw

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in

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CULTIVATING AESTHETIC PRACTICE FOR 21ST CENTURY LEARNING: ARTS-BASED LITERACY AS CRITICAL INQUIRY

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Jessica Whitelaw
Dedicated to Claire and Emmett, 
and

to the teachers and students at Tobin Arts Academy
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I would first like to thank my parents, Robert and Frances Whitelaw. This labor of love traces a path back to the two of them and by proxy, to words and to art; they taught me to live a life where there has never been a shortage of either one, and I am eternally grateful for that. Most recently, I owe thanks to their unconditional love and support throughout the process of writing this dissertation.

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ABSTRACT

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Jessica Whitelaw
Susan L. Lytle

This study is about art, literacy, and adolescents. It addresses a need for research that studies and theorizes arts-based learning for adolescents from sociocultural and critical perspectives, and a need for empirical research on the intersections among the arts, aesthetics, and critical literacy practice. Through participatory inquiry, I explore how arts-based literacy was taken up and understood by students over the course of one school year in two English classes in an arts-based high school. Through sociocultural critical literacy and aesthetic frameworks, I study how art was positioned and engaged in these classes and what this work meant to the teachers and students. Using ethnographic and qualitative methods, I study and theorize this work with and alongside teachers and students.

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The teacher and student voices about what engages their hearts and minds, have implications for pedagogy, policy, and research related to the intersections between the arts and adolescent literacy in 21st century learning. The research shows ways that an aesthetic practice that required uncertainty, openness, and relational identity-building enhanced the goals of critical inquiry. Finally, the study makes an argument for the role of aesthetics in critical literacy education, a topic that has been largely absent from mainstream discourses on policy and practice.
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Chapter I

Arts-Based Literacies for Adolescents

An Overview of the Chapter

In this introductory chapter, I map the territories for an interdisciplinary approach to art education, literacy, and multimodalities and I frame an argument for why this work in a high school setting is especially relevant now. I begin by locating arts integration and literacy education within current the current educational climate of policy and practice. Then, I outline an array of conceptual frameworks for approaching the two domains together.

Although this dissertation is the result of data spanning one school calendar year, in it, I address questions that have been germinating for many years through my experiences of living - as a student, as a reading, writing, and literacy teacher, as a literacy coach, as a colleague, as a district literacy coordinator, and as a parent. My own teaching career spanned the years of 1994-2005, a decade marked by a shifting national policy climate around literacy and education, new emerging discourses around the term literacy, and a
narrowing climate of standardization and accountability that trailed the institution of No Child Left Behind. These years also saw new socials problems arise that would mark this decade and beyond: the school shootings of Columbine High School (in the state I was living and teaching at the time) and terrorism in the face of September 11th, each of which brought with them a wake of after-effects – more school shootings, increased security and lock-down drills, as well as the onset of a lasting war with the middle east. As a young teacher of adolescents, I found myself facing questions I was unprepared for, about how to teach within a public and social space that was not unaffected by the hostility, isolation, and fears associated with these problems. I began to worry about the juxtaposition of larger problems around societal isolation being reinforced and extended in schools by the dehumanizing effects of a narrowing climate of standardization. In my “small sphere of influence” (Woolman, 1989), the most hopeful option I could imagine was to seek to engage students’ funds of creativity, intellect, promise, compassion and innovation, sensing that that this work was as important now as ever.

During this time, I became drawn more and more to connections between the arts and literacy as I sought ways of engaging students and designing opportunities for learning that would be both intellectually challenging and meaningful to students’ lives. In my work with students, integrating the arts into our literacy learning served as a means of better understanding each other, of leveraging multiple perspectives about things that mattered to us, and of naming our hopes and developing a sense of efficacy to do something about them. Additionally, compatible with humanistic principles of the arts, I found arts-based literacies to be anchored in a commitment to creative, non-violent problem-solving, and I began to discover and to think about the ways in which “the arts
play a vital role, cultivating powers of imagination that are essential to citizenship” (Nussbaum, p.85). Along this journey, and despite the discourses I encountered that would argue otherwise, I sensed a growing belief that these humanistic principles were not incompatible with emerging discourses about academic rigor. In a world as complex and diverse as the world is today - technologically, aesthetically, linguistically, culturally, and socially – I had found that images, sounds, movement, and print, taken together, created rich contexts for the exploration of social and cultural meaning-making. I found that the design and enactment of arts-based literacy pedagogy had a way of enhancing the depth of our work together, of deepening it, not detracting from it. Questions around what role the arts played and could play in teaching and learning began to take root.

This study emerges, in part, from tensions around how the arts are talked about in educational and public discourse, and more specifically about how they relate to literacy. Throughout my career, I have encountered the pervasive assumption that the arts, as a fundamentally creative enterprise, by definition, do not count as real learning; at times art has been framed as activities, as projects, as cultural capital, as enrichment, as a reward, as an afterthought, or even, as one teacher I knew referred to art-related work, as TWAs (Time Wasting Activities). Still, despite these assumptions and the arts’ tenuous position in schools, I am drawn to the idea that in theory, many maintain an underlying belief that the arts are important and believe they should be part of children’s education. The often-cited Louis Harris survey (NRCA, 1992)\(^1\), for example, reported that 60% of Americans felt that exposure to the arts in schools was very important, 76% felt it should be paid for, and 60% felt it is was important as math and science. Although, in theory, the public and

\(^{1}\) A survey of this scope has not been conducted since.
policy-makers alike seem to agree that arts matter, what seems less clear is how and where they might be located in schools, and to what effects or benefits (Caughlan, 2008; National Arts Policy Roundtable, 2010; Burnaford, Brown, Dougherty & McLaughlan, 2007). Mapping a high stakes policy climate onto strong theoretical support that the arts matters, yet with limited compelling evidence for how (particularly outside of arts disciplines), situates my research into arts-based literacies within dynamic, occupied, terrain.

In this dissertation, I take up theorized but understudied notions of what it might mean to learn through and with the arts as central to challenging intellectual and social work in classrooms, and how this work might be enacted with adolescents. In doing so, I attempt to convey rich images alongside a theorizing of those images, to inform practice-based research that is needed to better understand arts learning within complex environments of school in these times.

**Arts Education Matters: The “Less Than” Legacy**

To study arts-based literacy teaching and learning requires recognizing and making sense of the long-standing “less-than” legacy of the arts. Just as the arts have faced an enduring struggle over the years to secure their place in schools, this place is especially contested within today’s climate of high-stakes testing and accountability. To begin with, standardized testing, that relies upon psychometrics and public judging of the quality of education to drive the curriculum, bypasses commitment to art because it is difficult to measure. Policy implications of national and state standards that operate upon assumptions of uniformity and predictability have led, more often than not, to a narrowing of both what counts in school as learning, and a related de-prioritizing of the
arts. The response to increased school mandates around accountability is all-too-familiar: when schools, particularly those struggling to meet Adequate Yearly Progress, face pressures for student performance in testable subjects and limited budgets, the arts disciplines, along with other non-tested/testable subjects, are the first to be cut. In these and other schools, children whose test scores fall below proficient levels are scheduled out of art and into addition literacy-as-skills classes that are designed around testing benchmarks.

Likewise, in this environment, the arts become less likely to be integrated into high stakes subject areas such as literacy. The response to increased pressure and mandates, more often than not, has been to extend the literacy block where, in the name of accountability and efficiency, the nature of the work is made more regimented and less open to anything that is perceived as diverging from a fixed outcome. Whereas historically, literature and writing as school subjects fell under the umbrella of the arts, shifting conceptualizations of these subjects over the years have brought new terminology - from English Education, to reading and writing, to language arts, and to literacy. Throughout these shifts, an epistemological trend toward viewing literacy as technical skills, within larger narrow definitions of scientism, have further separated literacy and art in mainstream discourse.

Alongside this movement toward accountability and efficiency, circulates a host of other assumptions about art that further marginalize its place in schools: that it requires money, that it is useful only to those with talent, that it requires “doing” versus “thinking,” that it is a form of entertainment, and that it requires specialists to teach it (Davis, 2007). In short, literacy is seen as something that students need, and art is
something that is *nice* to have.

**Art in a Box: Policy in Arts Learning**

Looking to broader definitions of art and its role in schooling is a departure from the ways that the arts are often configured and talked about in circulating discourse and policy. For instance, the 2007/2008 Arts Education State Policy Survey cites that all states have now developed and have in place arts education standards, and all but eight states have an arts education requirement for non-arts teachers. While this policy suggests a level of commitment to the arts in schooling, the nature of the how the arts are talked about continue to marginalize it. Taking a closer look at these standards, they require that students should: 1) be able to communicate at a basic level in the four arts disciplines; 2) be able to communicate proficiently in at least one art form; 3) be able to develop and present basic analyses of works of art; 4) have an informed acquaintance with exemplary works of art from a variety of cultures and historical periods; and 5) be able to relate various types of arts knowledge and skills within and across the arts disciplines. The same policy document urges that, “without question, the standards presented here will need supporters and allies to improve how arts education is organized and delivered. They have the potential to change education policy at all levels, and to make a transforming impact across the entire spectrum of education, *but only if they are implemented*” (emphasis in original). The discourse of art here, constructs knowledge of and about art largely as a *commodity* that one can become acquainted with, than can be analyzed, communicated, and around which one can develop skills. Less attention is given to the notion of art as *ideas*. The fifth point seems to gesture toward more complex epistemic ways of thinking about art as “types of arts knowledge” but still within a
seemingly static configuration, alongside “skills” that can be transferred across the curriculum.” This language, and other policy like it, couched mainly in modern, formalist understandings of art, raises questions about the possibilities for what it would mean to take an *arts-based* approach to teaching and learning outside of the disciplines of art. The oblique reference to arts integration in the fifth point as arts knowledge and skills across the curriculum seems to be a response to a growing sense that the arts will continue to be marginalized if compartmentalized only as arts classes, and that cultivating the arts as ways of knowing requires learning through and with the arts across the school curriculum. Research clearly suggests that in addition to more arts-disciplinary study, more integrated approaches are needed, and that the “false dichotomy” (Aprill, 2010) between arts and arts integrated teaching is counter-productive in these times. However, this document is one example of how current policy discourse falls short of addressing what it might mean to learn through and with the arts as ways of knowing. This dissertation is in part, a response to the notion that arts learning outside of arts disciplines has gone largely under-theorized and understudied outside of epistemologies that foreground skills transfer from one subject to the next.

**Adolescents and Art: Assumptions and Ironies**

Cultural assumptions about what art is, who and what it is for, and what it can do, tend to be visible in the ways that children experience art over the course of their schooling. For example, although upper grades may offer more formal arts classes such as studio classes and art history, opportunities to experience the arts as central to the construction of knowledge are more often progressively de-emphasized as students move through the grades. At the same time, outside of school, adolescents often engage in a
range of multimodal literacies and forms of representation including music, dance, and other arts-related practices, particularly having to do with new media and youth culture. While it is not uncommon in elementary classrooms for children to draw, write, sing, and move their way into literacy learning, this multiplicity of options generally narrows in significant ways over time. As students move into high school, we often associate the drawing, writing, singing, and moving - as ways of knowing - as child’s play, unrelated to, distracting, or even detrimental to the more serious work of school, but that knowing about the arts, or to be accomplished in them, carries value and cultural capital. Notions of intellectual sophistication, more often than not, operate within a framework that tends to become epistemologically more limiting as students move through the grades. This, coupled with an already narrowing curriculum around testable subjects, makes adolescents particularly subject to limited opportunities for arts learning in school.

The place of art in school is not only marked by age, but in terms of race and social class as well. The narrowing of curriculum around testable subjects and content has had its deepest impact on English language learners as well as poor and minority students. As I mentioned already, efforts to close the achievement gap have effectively resulted in less opportunity for art in failing schools and more remediation. The notion that the arts encompasses many language systems that all children may draw upon, and that both language as well as other forms of representation can be intellectually challenging and mutually generative, at the same time that they promote more equitable opportunities for all children, deserves further study and attention in research, policy and practice.
Despite the important work of dedicated teachers and schools all across the country, it is clear that secondary education is not serving well a great many of our young people. For instance, locally, according to the city’s Youth Network, 40% of youth drop out of high school, half of ninth-graders graduate on time, and 60% of those ninth graders graduate in six years. Amidst these troubling statistics, it is perhaps more troubling that so little research and policy takes into account the voices of adolescents themselves and what engages their hearts and minds in school. In 2010, the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act issued a statement that called for higher standards, better assessments, and more teacher training in order to address its premier goal of preparing youth to be college and career ready, its second goal of cultivating great teachers and leaders in every school, and its third goal of creating equitable opportunities for all students. What the document does not take into account, as Morrell (2010) points out, is that “a blueprint for reform has to understand engagement and has to make education relevant socially and culturally” (p.148).

By placing student voices as central in this study, I seek to better understand the sense-making of adolescents around the work that they are doing in school and what matters to them in the contexts of their lives and communities. Assuming adolescents to be the most important stakeholders in our efforts to improve schooling and life opportunity for youth, I consider their voices as central and put them in conversation with teachers, policy discourse, and my own observations. While I don’t mean to suggest that the results of this study can or should be generalizable, I do undertake this work with the assumption that the juxtaposition of these voices, taken together, can inform research, policy, and practice.
A Beginning Place or Arts-Based Teaching and Learning

To define the parameters for “the arts” in this study, I draw from recent theoretical shifts that consider the arts within one epistemology that relies on the aesthetic, the imagination, and the embodiment of meaning (Abbs, 2003; p.57). While there are traditionally six arts - visual arts, drama, dance, music, film, and literature, the way I use the term “the arts” here, refers to the design and representation of meaning through a range of forms including the six traditional ones, as well as a range of hybrid forms that combine digital modes and other forms of representation. It is important to note that there are many conflicting ways of defining art in the literature and policy that I draw from throughout the study as I stake out a territory for this arts-based work with adolescents. For instance, the arts as defined in the Arts Education Frameworks do not include literature; the way I am defining the arts for this study does. Here, I make the distinction between literature - as one of the arts - and literacy/literacies – the focus of this study. Additionally, in this study, the arts as I refer to them, and in keeping with the “visual turn” (Mitchell, 1995), includes popular media. Although knowing about the arts is relevant to the ways that I am thinking about arts-based literacies, my study is interested in questions about the potential for adolescents to engage in literacy learning through and with the arts.

Learning in school through art is not a new idea. During the late 19th century English art historian Herbert Read (1944) suggested a framework for arts integration by proposing that schools should be concerned with educating artists. His idea was not that everyone would or should aspire to be painters, dancers, or musicians, but rather “individuals who have developed the ideas, the sensibilities, the skills, and the
imagination to create work that is well-proportioned, skillfully executed and imaginative, regardless of the domain in which the individual works.” These ideals were taken up further by the progressive education movement in the early 20th century when Dewey and others explored holistic approaches to learning and foregrounded the interrelationship between the arts and other subject areas. Since then, arts integration has been given more and less attention, coming into focus again in the 1970s, with open classrooms, and again in the 1980s with Gardner’s (1983) work around multiple intelligences. The current times are particularly ripe for (re)considering the role of arts-based approaches to learning. At the same time that expanding notions of literacy and new and emerging literacies are incongruent with a curriculum that continues to narrow around accountability and high stakes measures rather than expand, a growing body of research makes a compelling case for learning through and with art as a way of negotiating these literacies within a changing communicative landscape.

**Toward an Aesthetic Framework for Arts-Based Learning**

Taking inspiration from Dewey (1934), Greene (1995), and Eisner (2002), I look to aesthetics as a lens for studying arts-based learning outside of the arts disciplines. Through an aesthetic framework, and as a departure from arts integration studies that consider the role of the arts in relation to learning outcomes, I foreground the role of perception in learning. Since perception is enacted through the senses - we perceive things as they are based on a sensory system, and how well we can use it - foregrounding perception affords the examination of associated capacities of awareness, insight, observation, and acuity. In this way, perception is seen as something that can be

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developed and honed – not taken for granted. By attending to perception, Eisner (2002) argues, we slow down, we look harder, we notice things – through the development of “sensibility,” we see what we might hardly notice under normal conditions. Perception is a useful lens for considering how schools might take on the project of working collectively toward the development of these capacities as part of what it means to learn.

I conceptualize a pragmatic aesthetics over one that is associated with works of high culture or fine art to consider how art could be embedded epistemologically throughout the curriculum rather than as a discipline-based concentration in developing aesthetic taste or locating aesthetic value. Instead, because it deals with the significance of art, the notion of aesthetics I am working with here is rooted in theorizing and understanding connections between art and everyday experience (Dewey, 1934). Aesthetic understanding in this iteration provides a lens for imagining a rich, arts-based literacy pedagogy because it has a change orientation; it assumes that engagement with the arts offers a set of experiences beyond enjoyment, and that these experiences change the viewer and the maker. It is a vantage point that enables the consideration of how objects of experience change, alter, or open up perspectives (Greene, 2001, Eisner 2002) and how they affect ways of knowing, relating to, and being in the world (Greene 2001, p. 5).

This notion of aesthetics and perception is both embodied and relational. Deleuzian notions of art existing in the spaces “between me and not me” (as described in Ellsworth, 2005) suggest that the spaces of art are necessarily relational spaces rather than discrete objects. Art is created by someone, for an audience, to be encountered within a social context. When conceptualized in this way, experiences with art can be
considered to have relational effects – in our encounters with the artwork itself, with ourselves, with each other, and our individual and collective cultural histories across time and space.

To approach art as experience, rather than object, is to approach art as embodied experience through a full range of capacities. Premised on the notion that the intellectual and affective realms operate simultaneously in learning and in making sense of experience, and drawing less of a distinction between the capacities of thinking, feeling, and acting, embodied experience assumes that learning involves cognition, but never direct, unmediated cognition (Ellsworth, 2005). For example, Greene (1995), whose work cuts across the domains of art, literature, and aesthetics, argues that because the arts de-center us, they can be used as a platform for “releasing the imagination” (1995) to think in new ways, with new lenses, to see differently, to become “wide-awake,” to help us to “break through the inertia of habit” (2001, p. 21), beyond what is normal and taken-for-granted. These encounters might be identifiable “moments of awakening” or “shocks into awareness” (Greene, 1995) or quiet, perhaps barely recognizable learning encounters. From these perspectives, I understand learning to be experiential, and conceptualize aesthetics as a lens to consider arts-based literacies in terms of their effects on embodied human perception.

**Locating Art**

For Dewey (1934), the notion of aesthetic experience was central to art. He argued that the conditions for art can be met when an individual interacts with any aspect of the world aesthetically, attentive to process and form. Emphasizing experience over art object, he argued, brings art closer to life, and further from its place on a pedestal.
Viewing school through the lens of Dewey’s (1934) notion of the relationship between art and everyday life, leaves much room for inquiry into the place of the arts in schools in these times. Taking Dewey’s concept one step further to consider the problem of “recovering the continuity of aesthetic experience with normal processes of living” (p. 9), offers a framework for re-envisioning and reconstructing the role of art in the school curriculum. If it seems too much to suggest that art pervades life in all its dimensions, one needs only to take a cursory glance at the images we encounter each day and the ways we spend our leisure time to recognize the vast influence of art on our everyday lives. This may be especially true for adolescents, and most evident in youth culture.

Recognizing and developing an awareness of the idea that art plays a significant role in everyday life, finding ways to better study the role that art plays in our individual and collective lives, and how our lives and schooling might be enhanced by art, strikes me as a promising approach to envisioning the school curriculum as not just relevant to life, but more connected to life, and integral to a vital democratic society. My concern is not with defining the value of the arts per se, but with understanding the relationship between art and students’ lives. I look to art as way of better understanding what students and teachers bring as a full range of experiences, funds of knowledge, and interpretive resources to their work in school, and what it might look like to envision more continuity between the activities of school and a democratic society. In other words, how does school recognize, value, and build upon the interests and experiences of students across a vast array of modalities, forms of representation, and ways of knowing that students engage in their everyday lives outside of school?
Locating Literacy

English teachers have long treated literature as a vehicle for aesthetic experience however art, in its vast range of forms could arguably bring learning even closer to adolescents’ lived experience, making art and literacy an especially provocative pairing in these times. Several years into my teaching career, in 1999, the International Reading Association issued its Adolescent Literacy Position Statement (Moore et. al, 1999), which was widely regarded as the first policy document to address adolescents and an emerging discourse around literacy. The following year, I took a district literacy position as an “adolescent literacy coach” in this emerging field. At the time, there were mixed expectations for what work in literacy should be, and within this uncertainty, many simply applied the new term “literacy” to familiar practices of reading and writing. Tensions persist around what literacy means both in the field and outside the field, which has implications for both disciplinary literacy teaching as well as literacy learning through and with the arts. In the influential Alliance for Education Report, Reading Next, Biancarose and Snow (2006) assert that “enough is already known about adolescent literacy—both the nature of the problems of struggling readers and the types of interventions and approaches to address these needs—in order to act immediately on a broad scale” (p.9). This conflation of literacy with basic reading and the idea that enough is already known is indicative of one way that adolescent literacy has been taken up in research, policy, and practice. Situating the range of definitions that are contested, Willis (1997) provides three common ways of conceptualizing the question, What is literacy?: literacy as skill, literacy as school knowledge, and literacy as a social and cultural construct. Importantly, she argues that common-sense approaches
(ie. that we already know what there is to know and we just need to do it) are often built upon unexamined assumptions about the neutrality of literacy and myths about a common culture.

In this study, I work with a conceptualization of literacy as a socio-political process of sense-making through language in its many forms of representation and modalities. Drawing from Vygotsky’s (1978) early work, this framework draws attention to the social and cultural conditions of learning, this framework has more recently been applied to literacy learning (Street, 1984, 1995, 2003; Gee, 1991). Street (1984, 1995) for example, argues that literacy is a set of practices grounded in social and cultural contexts and therefore ideological rather than autonomous. When literacy is seen as a process that is socially situated and constructed with and among others, it can be viewed as fluid, shifting, intent-driven, and necessarily sociopolitical rather than as a discrete and fixed set of skills. As such, issues of race, culture, identity, gender, power, and agency, as deeply embedded in social contexts for learning, are necessarily implicated in ways of reading, sense-making, and being in the world. Alongside expanded definitions of literacy come expanded definitions of text. Freire (1970) and the New Literacy Studies (The New London Group, 1996) offer expanded notions of literacy that take into account world reading and a range of multimodal texts. Taken together, this work, assuming that worlds are necessarily and fundamentally multimodal, conceptualizes literacy beyond sense-making of print text and as “word and world reading” (Freire, 1987). Finally, when literacy is seen as a process of creation and construction, it is necessarily rooted in

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3 Freire famously argued that we read worlds before we read words and that word and world reading is ongoing and recursive throughout the lifespan.
the imagination. Royster (2000) makes links between literacy, the imagination, and “making connections” and “seeing possibility.” Her notion of imagination is not fanciful or escapist, but instead important to questioning a viewpoint, an experience or an event and in remaking interpretive frameworks based on that questioning (Royster, 2000, p.83).

**Multimodal Literacies**

Expanded notions of text are punctuated by today’s communicative culture. The idea that fixed bodies of knowledge are disappearing in a globalizing world, calls for more inter-disciplinary studies into how learning takes place within this changing and multimodal landscape. Although questions about where the arts should be located in school are not new, in this study I make an attempt to cast these questions within an increasingly globalized world, within the complex needs of a diverse society, and amid the changing faces of new literacies. I take up this work within a rapidly changing landscape of literacy education and literacy practices that have been characterized by terms such as “the tectonic shift” (Yancey, 2004) and “the visual turn” (Mitchell, 1995). New and emerging literacies that call for a rethinking of what counts as literacy and associated questions about how it is taught in schools, signal a timeliness for students, teachers, and researchers to engage in collective inquiry into the interplay between and among a wide range of meaning-making systems including, but not limited to, the alphabetic. To help frame this work, I look to social semiotics to provide a lens for thinking about the arts and multimodal literacies within the same theoretical framework (Kress, 2005).

As a symbol systems approach, multimodal literacies considers human experience in terms of the signs and systems that are used to represent, convey, and express meaning.
Social semiotic theory assumes that learning is motivated by a need to understand something (Kress, 2003) and suggests that, as users and makers of language, individuals and groups select signs according to both their availability and aptness for a given purpose. Informed by the work of Halliday (1978), Hodge and Kress (1988), and Kress and Van Leeuwen (2006), multimodal literacy is comprised of multiple modes such as image, writing, layout, music, gesture, and movement, where “mode” is considered to be “a socially and culturally given resource for making meaning” (Kress, 2009 p.54). These sign systems convey meanings recognized in a social context. While meaning is made within and across many modes and in each one differently, modes rarely - if ever, work in isolation. Instead, they actually have complex inter-relationships that rely on accompanying modes for meaning (Jewitt & Kress, 2003; Halliday, 1978; Hodge & Kress, 1988). Multimodality assumes that each mode is partial and that multiple modes allow for different kinds of meaning to be made, communicated, and understood. As a symbols-system approach, multimodality offers a way of thinking about expanded definitions of text and literacy to encompass multiple forms of representation and modalities\(^4\) and provides an apt lens to consider adolescents as language users and makers across a range of sign systems in and out of school. Finally, multimodal literacies also takes on particular importance today in terms of the social practices associated with new and emerging literacies (Luke & Freebody, 1997). It is a lens that takes into account the range of ways that students and teachers are engaging, navigating, making sense of, 

\(^4\) Modes and media are thought to exist in complex constellations. To account for both in this study, I will often refer to “multiple forms of representation and modalities” to account for both artistic and multimodal ways of looking. Writing, for example is a mode, but an essay, a book, a poem are a media and types of media may be a genre within a book. I use representation (alongside mode) as an “elastic notion” (Mitchell, 1994) to account for a range of what is normally considered media or genre.
and critiquing global flows of images and texts in this changing landscape (Luke, 2003).

**Literacy Policy Amidst Discourses of Change**

Despite the ubiquitousness of the term, and assumptions about a singular referent, what is meant by 21st century literacies is largely contested terrain. While the term itself suggests that literacies are multiple and changing, there are a range of discourses circulating that are often in conflict around this term, even within a single document. We often see policy around 21st century literacies seeming to argue on the one hand that the literacies of the past and approaches to teaching and learning them won’t hold for the indeterminable future, while on the other, suggesting a back-to-basics, skill-centered approach to address a perceived crisis. This conflicting language often gets collapsed into skills-centered discourses to prepare a 21st century workforce, alongside an acknowledgement of a shifting, fluid, yet-to-be-determined landscape of the future.

For example, the National Council for Teachers of English (NCTE) Position Statement on 21st Century Literacies (2008), defines literacy as a “collection of cultural and communicative practices shared among people of particular groups” and as “multiple, dynamic, and malleable.” Yet despite references to the importance of relationships, collaboration and ethical responsibilities, the first initiative is listed as “to develop proficiency with the tools of technology.” The prominence of this goal in the document is suggestive of the way that literacy “tools” and “technology” are foregrounded in 21st century discourses about learning and what is needed. The implications of this foregrounding tend to be that educators and policy-makers worry about the technical aspects of new literacies and pay less attention to, or even ignore, other complex changes that are needed.
In the arts domains, The National Arts Policy Roundtable (2010) has sought to make links between the arts and important reform priorities for 21\textsuperscript{st} century learning. Responding to mainstream discourses about what is needed, their focus has been to help others understand how the arts prepare students to be “career ready” and “college ready.” Despite efforts to contribute to initiatives regarding creativity and innovation, their language is also aligned with “workforce preparation,” “skills advancement,” and how to make “more productive workers.” While on the one hand, they recognize the necessity of making art more central in school, advocate for incorporating more of what children and students are already interested in (pop music, media, animation, and design) and promote the idea that art is beneficial to all students, doing so in the interest of “college readiness” and “workforce preparation” raises questions about the value of arts learning and what kinds of 21\textsuperscript{st} century learning it advances.

This study sets out to explore what such a changing landscape might mean for the students and teachers living in and traversing it. Even though the range of capacities that may be required of students in the 21\textsuperscript{st} century are difficult to articulate, for the most part, we have yet to find compelling ways of talking about and designing for the role of the imagination, uncertainty, and innovation, within a landscape that many agree demands these capacities. While it may be that these shortfalls suggests something about our own capacities for imagination, uncertainty, and innovation, it has created a dilemma with 21\textsuperscript{st} century discourses: we need new ways of thinking about creativity and innovation as alternatives to narrow, skills-based discourses of the future, and similarly narrow approaches to the arts, literacy, and research. It will require an imaginative leap on the part of educators and policy-makers alike to address this changing landscape in
meaningful ways that are congruent with complex, socially-situated notions of teaching and learning. This study is one attempt to theorize and make visible alternative ways of thinking about 21st century literacies and learning through and with the arts.

**Arts and Literacy Now: From the Language of Possibility, Toward Images in Research and Practice**

Theoretically, links between the arts and literacy have been made as early as 1986 when cognitive researchers referred to arts as “literacies” in a range of sign symbols (Gardner, 1986; Eisner, 1991). Despite the generative possibility for combined arts and literacy practice and research, there has been limited, although growing, attention in educational research and across the disciplines. This study attempts to more fully understand the generative possibility for dialogue between researchers of arts education and literacy education, and seeks to contribute to a growing body of empirical work that explicitly leverages connections between the two disciplines. Historically, it has been argued that artists, in general seldom reach out to other stakeholders about the nature of their work (Fowler, 1996). Likewise, it is often the case that literacy teachers, researchers, and policy-makers do not claim a specific connection or commitment to art, often out of concern that they lack the disciplinary knowledge about what it means to teach it.

Efforts to promote learning across these disciplines might be reminded that historically, great social movements have been fueled at the intersections of literacy and art. The Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s and 30s, as a response to changes in African American culture after the abolition of slavery, grew out of literature, music, poetry, art, theater, and journalism, both as an artistic movement as well as a sociological one. A
wide proliferation of form within each of the genres of art, addressed common themes growing out of the lived experiences of its members: the influence of the experience of slavery on black identity, the influence of African-American folk traditions on black identity, institutional racism, tensions around performing and writing for elite white audiences, and questions around how to represent and convey the experience of modern black life in the urban north.

Similarly, The Highlander Folk School, a grassroots center for organizing originally founded by Myles Horton and set on a farm at the foothills of the Smokey Mountains of Tennessee, is known for its pivotal roles in labor organizing and in The Civil Rights Movement. Martin Luther King Jr. attended, Septima Clark taught there, and Rosa Parks studied there just prior to the Montgomery bus boycotts in 1955. Its activity drew from an embodied and relational approach to problem-solving that incorporated literacy and folk art in a range of forms of experience; at Highlander they danced, they sang together, they ate together, they had a community garden, they told stories, and they wrote. In the kinds of literacy experiences that Horton called “small islands of decency” (1997, p. 133), these literacies were understood as developing in the contexts of peoples’ lives and living – not apart from them.

I cast back to these rich examples to imagine what word/world reading (Freire, 1987) can and might look like in school; Freire worked closely with Horton at Highlander, and the school is one example of his seminal work around word/world reading in practice. Both histories are examples of how the arts and literacy intersect to conceptualize text and the process of reading more broadly. Both histories also make visible a relationship between worlds that are lived as multi-sensory and multimodal, and
the arts and multimodal literacies as means by which people engage in world/word reading. These images serve as an invitation to return to the aesthetic and explore it at the intersection of arts and literacy domains in educational research.

The notion of multiple ways of knowing in school is often considered in terms of Gardner’s influential (1983) work around multiple intelligences\(^5\). While this work has paved the way for connections between literacy and multiple pathways to knowing, in schools it has at times become somewhat of a sorting mechanism - a rationale for why some students should learn this way and others another. At times, it has had a way of limiting learning possibility to what was already happening; students who came in good at language got better at it, and students who came in not liking language didn’t because they were deemed to be kinesthetic learners or visual learners. Despite the argument that multiple intelligences and learning styles are not the same thing (multiple intelligences being the theoretical framework and learning styles being a student’s learning preference), the notion of learning styles often provided rationale for students’ perceived limitations, the argument being that one way was a better “fit” for a student. What this implementation failed to recognize was the extent to which capacities are learned and reinforced by the practices people are afforded.

At times, learning styles was talked about as an accommodation for students (Johnny needs more opportunities to move around because he is kinesthetic learner), as much, if not moreso than as a way of framing teaching and learning differently. I was reminded of this recently while recently attempting to explain to another parent on my

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\(^5\) Gardner’s theoretical model identifies eight intelligences, what he called “bio-psychological potentials” that are differentiated by specific modalities: spatial, linguistic, logical-mathematical, bodily-kinesthetic, musical, interpersonal, intrapersonal, and naturalistic.
child’s school playground, how my study was about arts-based literacies and learning through the arts, and he responded by saying: “That sounds like it would be good for visual learners.” This may have had as much to do with my own weak explanation for the study as it did his misinterpretation, but I think it is also telling of the ways that multiple intelligences has been (mis)taken up over the years. What began as a move toward self-awareness and the recognition of truly multiple intelligences, has often been compacted into something altogether different – as learning styles that often further isolate children and compartmentalize young people (and teachers) according to, at best, what they’re good at, and at worst, what they’re not.

Students’ opportunities have been as much limited by this kind of compartmentalization as they have been expanded. From a different angle, what strikes me as most interesting, and perhaps most understudied about multiple intelligences, is how we might consider a range of pathways into thinking about literacy and arts learning that leverage a full spectrum of human capacities, and that doing so might not just help students to know things, but it might help students to know different things and to know differently. Seen in this way, multiple intelligences might be thought of as flexible capacities that we all hold and carry and that students can learn to develop in order to learn better, and to experience the world more fully.

In a related move toward expanded notions of learning through multiple ways of knowing, Eisner (1991) pointed out early links between the arts and literacy by arguing for the development of multiple forms of literacy. From a cognitive perspective, his early work argued for multiple forms of literacy that reflect more accurately how humans think in and through language, visual images, gesture, and sound. Describing these multiple
literacies as “codes to crack,” his argument was threefold: 1) that teaching multiple forms of literacy would increase the variety and depth of meaning that people can secure in their lives; 2) that it would increase cognitive potential; and 3) it would promote more equitable learning opportunities for children. Regarding his third point, Eisner made the argument that not to teach multiple forms of literacy is to enforce an “epistemological parochialism that limits what people can experience and therefore, what they come to know” (p.125). Eisner’s conception of multiple forms of literacy seemed to argue for the development of capacities for literacy across the arts disciplines in visual art, dance, and in music, in addition to print forms. By doing so, he sought to disrupt the over-reliance on print modes and to open up ideas about what counts as text.

From a socially situated perspective of literacy, I am also interested in opening up what counts as text through as multiple forms of representation, but I am interested less in multiple forms of literacy (as codes to crack), and more in developing literacy both in and through multiple forms. More recently, in describing the value in art-based educational research, Eisner (2011) argues that it is important to have multiple forms of understanding to understand complex phenomena that can be viewed in a range of ways, just as culturally we use many different forms to get on with the business of understanding each other and our lives (Barone & Eisner, p.10). Although he is referring here to research methodology, the same argument could be made for students’ literacy learning through the arts and multiple forms of representation.

Towards Arts-Based Literacies

In this study, I diverge from the term integration, mainly due to the many forms it can take, and also because of the way it often positions art as a commodity of transport.
Alongside a move to rethink the role of art and aesthetics in school, I am electing to use the term *arts-based learning* and *arts-based literacies*, because of their potential to consider the arts’ location in everyday experience and therefore already a part of the fabric of literacy and learning. In an ideal world, one that recognized a full range of human capacities and a notion of teaching and learning as a project that took this range as a starting place, we would not need the descriptor, arts-based. Until we get to that place, arts-based serves as a way of thinking about teaching and learning differently, and as a domain of inquiry into the notion of where we locate art in school. By focusing on the design and enactment of arts-based pedagogies in literacy classrooms, I intentionally position the central (literacy) alongside the peripheral (the arts) and by doing so, explore an image of possibility that repositions the arts in learning.

Drawing from sociocultural and sociopolitical perspectives that consider relational aspects of literacy learning, my study seeks to learn what we, as teachers, students, researchers, and policy-makers, might learn from bridging what Gadsden (2008) calls, the *old* (the arts) with the *new* (multimodal literacies) to better understand complex processes involved with learning across a range of modalities and forms of representation. While curriculum policy has moved away from all that is ineffable, limiting what children learn to what can be assessed, I have intentionally opted to rethink arts and literacies in ways that consider, trouble, and theorize the role of aesthetics in learning and why it is so needed now. Given the growing impact of new and emerging literacies on everyday life and the extent to which art is an enduring part of the material of everyday experience, better understanding the ways that students engage with multiple modes of text, the ways these texts relate to one another, and the meanings we attach to
these practices, strikes me as one of the most pressing challenges and exciting opportunities across the fields of literacy and arts education. Given the technical orientation of literacy in these times, an inquiry into aesthetic perspectives seems especially ripe for renewal.

To inquire into these issues, I took up this inquiry in the context of an arts-based high school in an urban setting over the course of one school calendar year, 2010/2011. There, working with ninth and tenth grade students and two English teachers, I investigated the question: What sense are teachers and students making of arts-based literacy teaching and learning?
Chapter II

Literature Review

Arts-Based Learning, Adolescent Literacies, and Multimodality

In the last chapter, I described the problem that this study seeks to address and outlined a set of frameworks and questions that I am using to approach this problem. In this chapter, I look specifically to recent empirical literature that relates to the arts, literacy, and multimodality. I will survey the landscape of these domains of study in order to trace a set of intersections that will situate my research as a site of inquiry. Since there is limited empirical research at the intersections of the arts, literacy, and multimodality, I begin by examining each domain separately. To limit the scope this project, I select studies in each domain that relate most closely to the other two. For instance, since many studies about art in non-arts disciplines use the term “arts integration,” I begin with an overview of these studies that have to do with literacy. Then, I turn to literacy research that explicitly foregrounds one or more arts areas,
followed by literacy research that is implicitly arts-related but not named as art. Finally, I look to research in multimodality. In the latter part of the chapter I review the studies that are carried out at the crossroads between the arts, literacy and multimodality. Since there is limited work in this arena carried out with adolescents, I review some relevant research with an elementary focus in order to argue for approaches to teaching and research that could be extended to adolescents. Carving out a rationale for my terminology “arts-based literacy” is an important goal of this chapter, as is positioning this study as a site of inquiry into theory and practice around arts-based literacy for adolescents.

The Arts

The Arts Outside of Arts Disciplines

Arts integration, arts infusion, learning in and through the arts, and arts-based learning, are some of the multiple discourses used to describe varying roles that the arts occupy in school, outside of arts disciplines such as visual art, drama, music and dance. Another layer out, associated terms include interdisciplinary studies, multidisciplinary studies, cross-disciplinary studies, experiential learning, and project method approaches. Expanding definitions of art, new media, and emerging technologies and spaces of art, further complicate distinctions around what counts as art and engagement with art, where arts learning takes place in school, and the nature and purposes of these engagements.

Tensions around definitions, spaces, and purposes of art in school have been the source of much excitement, possibility, and destabilization in recent years in theory, practice, research, and policy. This energy has intensified as students, teachers, researchers, and policy-makers negotiate what it means to create, communicate, and
make sense of meaning across a range of modalities and in a range of forms of representation in the shifting communicative landscape of these times. There is a growing sense that this range of faces, places, and purposes for arts engagement gesture toward blurring boundaries between and across disciplines, which is a conceptualization of school that we have yet to fully recognize, embrace, and find ways to talk about and engage. This study is situated within a vast range of definitions, spaces, and purposes of art in school learning outside of the arts disciplines, which makes it important to attempt to locate a domain for arts-based literacy learning.

In recent years, despite growing attention to connections between the arts and literacy, the term arts-based literacy is not one that has its own body of research. The term makes sporadic appearances in the literature, sometimes under the umbrella of arts integration and sometimes used interchangeably with arts integration. As a way of framing a lexicon for this work, and to define and situate arts-based literacy, I first look to studies across a range of terminology and configurations of arts learning outside of arts disciplines. I approach this from a position that the terminology matters, that no language is neutral, and that each term carries historical traditions around that terminology and accompanying expectations and assumptions with its use. Since literacy and art share a trait of having at times elusive identities, this creates a research challenge that is amplified when talking across these disciplines. In the first half of this chapter, I attempt to make visible some distinctions among different approaches and traditions associated

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with learning in and through the arts outside of the arts disciplines. In the second half of the chapter, I situate adolescent literacy in ways that intersect with arts learning.

**Locating Arts Integration**

Over the past decade, a substantial body of research in arts engagement outside of the arts disciplines has been conducted around the term “arts integration,” a concept used loosely to refer to a range of frameworks and configurations for arts engagement and inclusion in the non-arts disciplines. Since 1992, arts organizations have acknowledged the importance of arts integration amidst ongoing challenges and debates concerning the role of the arts in school learning. As arts integration is recognized by many as an imperative in an increasingly visual and performance-oriented social landscape, many worry that arts integration may conflict with, dilute, or undermine the core arts disciplines, position art as secondary to other subject areas, and serve as a rationale for districts to further cut and undermine arts programming as art seeps its way into other subjects of the school day. Amidst these debates in the field, some argue for the teaching of visual culture in art education, citing that the times call for new ways of thinking about art with the changing faces of media (Duncum, 2001, Freedman, 2000, 2003). Embedded in these concerns are debates about the value and differences between art education, media studies, visual literacy, and cultural anthropology (Smith, 1991).

The term arts integration, an offshoot of “curricular integration” (Beane, 1997), gained attention in the 1960s and renewed attention in the 1990s, and casts back to the work of John Dewey and Herbert Reed and others who argued for a more integrated and

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7 In 1992 a “Joint Statement on Integration of the Arts with Other Disciplines and with Each Other” was issued by a Consortium of National Arts Education Associations. While the statement endorsed art as a means of enriching other subject areas, it cautions against exclusive integration that would compromise arts disciplinary instruction.
cohesive curriculum. In the 1970s, Harry Broudy called for the integration of arts and aesthetic education across subject areas as a means of cultivating the imagination and as “basic education” (1991). In the early part of the 20th century, Winslow’s (1939) *The Integrated School Art Program* describes a set of relationships between the arts and the core curriculum, believing that art is a way of connecting students to everyday life and a way of solving community problems. Although in principal, integration has been put forth as an ideal in American schooling as far aback as 1918, when the Cardinal Principals of Secondary Education issued a report promoting integration, a correlated curriculum, and curricular organization around major themes, integration has not seen a unified or widespread movement, nor has it become a standard practice in public schools.

Still, the body of research on arts integration is vast, arguably in part because it casts such a broad definition. The extent to which arts integration has been taken up in a wide range of ways in recent years, is made visible by a review of research on this subject by Burnaford (2007) and a team of researchers whose literature review includes 247 referents that embody a multitude of ways of characterizing arts integration. Citing the range and variation of conceptual frameworks behind these studies, and a difficulty in characterizing integration as a whole, Burnaford and her colleagues argue that the field of arts education “is in need of a research agenda” (Burnaford et.al. 2007). They argue that issues of skills transfer have dominated arts integration research and that more complex theoretical frameworks and research designs are needed. As this comprehensive review suggests, with increased interest in the arts outside of arts disciplines, there has been little agreement about the goals of arts integration and theories of research and practice that inform what it sets out to accomplish (Parsons, 2004).
Frameworks for Characterizing Arts Integration

I locate this work in relation to arts integration in the hopes of generating and contributing to conversations about where art lives in school and what form its inclusion takes and could take. To situate this study, and drawing on the Burnaford (2007) review, I mark four ways that arts integration is taken up in the literature. They are: 1) arts in the interest of other disciplines; 2) arts and other disciplines working together to enhance disciplinary knowledge and curricular connections (co-generative, equal partners for school knowledge); 3) arts disciplines working together to cultivate habits of mind that enhance curricular learning in both arts and non-arts disciplines (thinking habits of mind for school knowledge); and 4) arts and non-arts disciplines as a site of critical inquiry (world reading, socially situated and with a change agenda to approach problems in and out of school). Of course, these categories are discrete and rarely do studies embody one without traces of the other. But nonetheless, studies tend to be conducted under the first three framings; there are fewer empirical studies that explore arts integration as a site of critical inquiry in schools.

There is mixed opinion in the field about how to make sense of this lack of agenda; one argument being that this speaks to an organic proliferation of research in different contexts, and is a function of the diversity of the spaces the research inhabits (Deasy, 2002); another being that this lack of a cohesive movement makes it difficult to speak about arts integration, and to advocate for it in coherent ways (Burnaford, 2007). For example, a National Forum Report on Arts Integration from the Arts Education Partnership makes visible and celebrates a range and variation of ways of characterizing arts integration. In this report, Deasy (2002) defines arts integration in terms of curricular
relationships and associated skills and subjects, as: “the effort to build a set of relationships between learning in the arts and learning in the other skills and subjects of the curriculum” (p.3). Among the range and variation in goals for arts integration programming that are featured in this study include: to improve instruction; as differentiated instruction; to help teachers and students appreciate and value differences in abilities and learning styles; to address literacy; as a form of accountability; and to assist reading comprehension. One participant voice featured in the study says: “there are so many language constructs out there that which term you use doesn’t matter, as long as everyone agrees on what we’re doing and why” (p.6). This work underscores that there is very little agreement upon the goals and purposes of arts integration as a whole, where the criteria for arts integration is often defined by a comprehensive umbrella that encompasses any school learning that includes art in non-arts disciplines. Additionally, this report characterizes arts integration as a neutral set of skills for school knowledge and as a process of enhancing connections between and among those skills.

Skills, Transfer, and School Knowledge

As mentioned in Burnaford’s (2007) work, significant attention has been given over the past ten years, to issues concerning transfer of arts learning. In efforts to justify the arts, these studies focus on the role of the arts in learning and how skills transfer from arts disciplines to non-arts areas of study. More specifically, these studies have focused on causal links, correlations, and transfer between the study of an art form or forms, and outcomes in non-arts areas such as verbal achievement, mathematics achievement, spatial reasoning, non-verbal reasoning, and creative thinking (Winner & Hetland, 2000). Transfer approaches have been one way of applying measurement schema to art in an
educational climate that has called for schools and teachers to justify arts inclusion numerically. Within these conversations about transfer, studies can be divided into those that investigate the correlational effects of art, and experimental studies that look to identify causal links between arts learning and other domains of study (Winner & Cooper, 2000).

Studies of learning transfer throughout the literature in arts integration, tend to make distinctions between the cognitive and affective realms of learning. For example, two overarching ways of framing the value of the arts in causal studies have been: 1) the cognitive structure argument; and 2) the motivational argument (Winner & Cooper, 2000). The cognitive structure argument is premised on a belief that learning in the arts develops skills that can be applied and transferred to other subject areas. The motivational argument is premised on a belief that arts learning might stimulate motivational changes that “spill over” into academic studies (Winner & Cooper, 2000). Notions of confidence, bonding, mentorship, and stress reduction are included in the second framing. Because they are more likely to be measureable, attention has largely been given to addressing, naming, and arguing for the cognitive capacities that are engendered through art.

*Critical Links*, a landmark study under the auspices of the National Endowment for the Arts and the US Department of Education, conducted by James Caterall, Lois Hetland, and Ellen Winner and edited by Richard Deasy (2002), provides a meta-analysis of the impact of the arts on non-arts learning in a summary of sixty-two studies of student engagement with dance, drama, multi-arts, music, and visual arts. Although the study is quick to point out that not all transfer is assumed to be alike or direct, and although the
compendium includes a range of kinds of studies both quantitative and qualitative, the overarching goal in assembling the data was “to identify cognitive models that account for transfer and causal links.” Among the research relating to literacy, the compendium draws attention to links between: issues of transfer between dance and creative thinking (Kohn Bradley, 2002); issues of transfer between drama, imaginative play, comprehension, and the habit of mind to seek additional resources (Caterall, 2002); associations between music and spatial-temporal reasoning, reading achievement, and social-emotional behavioral objectives (Scripp, 2002); and the impact of the visual arts in learning to read, to enhance reasoning skills, and as an assessment measure (Baker, 2002). Five US studies address multi-arts involvement specifically with adolescents, involvement that is limited to arts classes. One study finds positive correlations between involvement in arts classes and higher verbal and math SAT scores (Vaughn & Winner, 2000). Another posits that students who take arts courses in and out of school and attend museums outside of school have increased success in school (Caterall, 1998a). Two studies look specifically at arts involvement in secondary arts classes, finding arts disciplinary study to have a positive effect on overall academic achievement (Caterall, Chapleau, and Iwanaga, 1999) and additionally that involvement in fine arts and performing arts classes are effective in dropout prevention (Barry, Taylor, & Walls, 1990). In one study, it is argued that involvement in the arts leads to success in high school as measured by achievement, attitudes, and behavior (Caterall, 1998b).

In the overview essay to Critical Links, Caterall (2002) clarifies the centrality of the issue of transfer to the compendium, its theoretical underpinnings from cognitive science and establishes “a neuro-function argument supporting learning through the arts –
the cultivation of capabilities and understandings that occur as ‘by-products’ or ‘co-developments’ of the changes in cognitive and affective structures brought about by experience in the arts” (p. 152). Although Caterall suggests that further “inquiry would ultimately need to accommodate growing evidence and beliefs that learning is situational, interactive, and complex (p. 156), the call for further research is nonetheless framed as “more thorough understandings of transfer learning,” a “higher order of transfer” (p.157), and “transfer with a capital T” (p. 157). It is also argued that, researchers have focused too narrowly on test scores and grades as outcomes, and that researchers need to begin to look at transfer outcomes that, while more relevant, are certainly going to be more difficult to measure. Throughout the report, these scholars call for more research on the complexities of how arts affects learning, and although they recognize the limitations of causal links, and remind the reader of the value of the arts for its own sake, they call for more studies that address the complexities within a framework of causal links. Horowitz & Webb-Dempsey (2002) point out that it is “these central questions about processes and contexts, outcomes and transfer that are critical to the identification and refinement of a research agenda that will establish the future role of the arts in education” (98). While arts integration has seen a host of purposes and approaches in the past two decades, this research agenda concerning transfer, causal link, and correlation has by far prevailed.

Important challenges have been made to arts research claims that lean too heavily upon transfer outcomes relating to academic achievement, and many have questioned the trend to justify the arts for their affects on other disciplines (Eisner, 1998; Burton, Horowitz & Abueles, 2000; Winner & Cooper, 2000; Winner, 2003). These scholars call for the need to go beyond transfer, to question uni-directional causality, and argue the
difficulty in asserting causal links between arts and non-arts areas. Instead, they call for
the need to look at the inherent as well as the instrumental value of art.

**What the Arts Teach**

A spate of large-scale studies in recent years explores learning with involvement
in the arts in order to name “what the arts teach,” and these studies have been carried out
both in and outside of the arts disciplines and beyond the walls of school. *Champions of
Change* (Fiske, 1999) is a compilation of seven major studies of arts learning over the
course of ten years from long-term and established projects and partnerships such as The
Chicago Arts Partnerships in Education (CAPE) (Caterall & Waldorf, 1999), Harvard’s
Project Zero (Seidel, 1999), and Creating Original Opera (COO) (Wolf, 1999). The
compilation names seven over-arching themes from the research collection that address
questions about what the arts teach (Fiske, 1999). Namely, they found that the arts: 1)
reach students who are not being reached; 2) reach students in ways that they are not
otherwise being reached; 3) connect students to themselves and each other; 4) transform
the environment for learning; 5) provide opportunities for the adults in lives of young
people; 6) provide new challenges for those already considered successful; and 7)
connect learning experiences to the world of real work (Fiske, 1999). *The Champions of
Change* project, funded by the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, The Arts
Education Partnership, and the President’s Committee on the Arts and Humanities, is
often cited in efforts to support and sustain arts integration programs, as justification for
why the arts matter, as an argument for funding, and as an example of how partnerships
between arts organizations and schools can be created and sustained.
Arts Partnerships

A movement has been made in the last decade toward more integrated and sustained studies and partnerships between and among schools, artists, and arts organizations. Fueled by the expansion of new realms of public art (Lacy, 1995; Goldbard, 2006) and the larger Community Arts movement dedicated to bringing art to the public through discourse and participation in art, arts organizations and schools have seen a growing commitment to partnerships. These forms range from teacher artists in the classroom, collaboration among teachers and artists, professional development opportunities, partnerships with museums and arts centers, and many extensions and variations on these configurations. Undergirded by wider definitions and purposes of art, these examples signify an orientation toward art that argues a democratic agenda to promote art in a range of forms and across a range of public spaces including schools, and sees the potential in art as a site for social and educational activism. Although not directly linked to arts-education partnerships, and although arts activism is disproportionately still an out-of-school educational endeavor, Community Art and the partnerships movement have played a role in efforts to link arts to schools and communities.

The *ArtsLiteracy* Project at Brown and Chicago Arts Partnerships in Education (CAPE) are two examples of a growing network of sustained partnerships between arts organizations, artists, and schools. With a focus on adolescent literacy, The *ArtsLiteracy* Project emphasizes the building of classroom communities to help students develop a range of skills and habits of mind through multiple sign systems associated with arts engagement. Alongside students and faculty, teachers work with professional actors and mentor students as they perform core texts for the public through a process that
emphasizes what they call socialization and skills. In a study of this work, Landay (2004) describes a process of identity formation that develops as students and mentoring adults learn to create and negotiate meaning in a range of sign systems within communities of practice (Lave and Wenger, 1991) and dialogic interaction (Bakhtin, 1986).

CAPE has received growing attention over the past decade for their work in arts integration, professional development, research, and community involvement. Described as both an arts organization and an educational organization, CAPE brings together and provides professional support for teaching artists and teachers in ongoing and sustained partnerships for arts integration in the Chicago Public Schools. Research, documentation, and inquiry are targeted toward improving and enhancing the partnerships as well as disseminating their work to the public through publications, performances, and published articles. Founding director Arnold Aprill and researcher Gail Burnaford have led these efforts work which currently address three primary research questions: 1) what are the effects of arts integration on teachers and students?; 2) what strategies of integration lead to positive results in students?; and 3) what interactions actually cause teachers to transform their arts integration practice? In a study that foregrounds student voices, DeMoss & Morris (2002) convey the experiences of students to make visible how arts integration through CAPE broadened their learning communities, enhanced their motivation to learn, enriched their capacities for analytic interpretation, helped them to develop connections in writing, and to engage in learning.

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8 See [http://www.capeweb.org/what-we-know-are-learning](http://www.capeweb.org/what-we-know-are-learning).
At the school-wide level, some have studied sustained practices of arts integration and the conditions that account for systemic changes in orientation toward art. The *A+ Schools Program*, since 1995, has made important contributions to conversations around using the arts a basis for school-wide reform. Characterizing their approach as one that “invigorates schools” and “promotes resilience,” Wilson, Corbett & Noblit (2001) and Noblit & Wilson (2009) argue that schools can create and sustain a positive school culture through art at the same time that they adhere to value-added reform measures and accomplish what is being demanded of them in terms of accountability. Results of a four-year evaluation study of A+ Schools found that the arts heightened students’ engagement in learning and that test scores matched those of students in non A+ schools.

Elsewhere, Deasy and Stevenson (2005) focused on ten schools across the United States, and looked specifically to art as a way of building a sense of community and better schools. Adopting the metaphor of the ‘third space’ to describe the relationships that developed through performance and through the creation of art, Deasy and Stevenson argue for the potential of art to have a positive affect on building relationships in schools and communities.

Other large scale partnerships include: Arts For Academic Achievement (AAA) in the Minneapolis Public Schools, Empire State Partnership and Arts Connection (both in New York City), and ArtsBridge, a partnership located at a number of university campuses across the United States. Locally, ArtsRising, a recent partnership between arts, education, and a community organization, is currently working to enhance and promote arts learning for students in select public middle schools in the city.
While the last decade has seen growing attention to sustained partnerships in schools, arts programming outside of school has also been a vital social enterprise when funding and opportunities are cut inside of schools. Heath’s (1998) work with community-based youth organizations reminds us that youth are a vital resource for communities, as this research makes visible how community-based youth organizations that focus on the arts improve the lives of the participating youth as well as the communities of which they are a part. ArtShow (Heath & Smyth, 1999), a study of two urban and two rural arts-based community development projects for youth, tells the stories of youth in disadvantaged neighborhoods throughout the country, who worked alongside supporting adults and over the course of a decade, to engage with art in order to learn, to develop a sense of optimism, and to improve their life chances. Moreover, the youth themselves are leading these partnerships and developing successful community organizations in the arts. Each of these studies takes seriously what youth bring as intellectual, civic, artistic, and enterprising resourcefulness and offers insight into a range of spaces where arts learning happens in ways that draw upon the affordances of those spaces.

**Thinking and Learning Dispositions**

As an alternative to skills-based frameworks for arts engagement but from a cognitive perspective, Eisner (2002) has favored a conceptual framing that considers “habits of mind” cultivated by arts learning. Describing habits of mind as ways of thinking that guide experience and inquiry into the world Eisner articulates five habits of mind that the arts teach: 1) learning to attend to relationships; 2) flexibility; 3) ability to
shift direction; 4) expression; and 5) imagination. These habits are often used as a rationale and justification for schools, both for arts education and arts integration and serve as an argument for the inherent versus instrumental value of art.

In a related vein, Tishman & Perkins, (1993) have considered learning in terms of the dispositions that allow for, encourage, and support learning across the lifespan and make an argument for moving from transmission toward enculturation through the teaching of thinking dispositions. Tishman and Grozer at Art Works for Schools, (a project of Harvard’s Project Zero) describe dispositions to account for attitudes, emotions and sensitivities as well as cognitive skills. They argue for four high-level thinking dispositions across arts and other disciplines: 1) the disposition to explore diverse perspectives; 2) the disposition to find, pose, and explore problems; 3) the disposition to reason and evaluate; and 4) the disposition to find and explore metaphorical relationships (www.pz.harvard.edu/Research/Artwks.tm).

These frameworks have served as a platform for teachers and researchers to consider broad implications of arts learning, and to consider the potential role that the arts can play in learning both in and outside of the arts disciplines. Some of these studies have drawn upon habits of mind to consider a host of other kinds of knowledge and capacities that the arts teach in addition to basic skills. Sometimes described as an alternative to the school-as-factory model, the studio model (Stevens, 2002) looks to the studio as a metaphor for thinking about the cultivation of studio habits of thinking. Situating their work directly in the art studio, Hetland, Winner, Veenema, and Sheridan (2007) sought a lexicon for talking about the kinds of dispositions that students learned in the studio and found eight studio habits of mind to describe what the arts teach based on
their work in visual arts classes in two high schools. From their research in these classes, they name eight studio habits of mind/dispositions: 1) developing craft; 2) engaging and persisting; 3) envisioning; 4) expressing; 5) observing; 6) reflecting; 7) stretching and exploring; and 8) understanding the art world. Premised upon a belief that before we can argue for the importance of arts education, we have to better articulate and understand what the arts teach, their study describes these habits of mind as dispositions that transfer to other areas of learning outside of the visual arts. What makes this work distinct from the studies in Critical Links, is that they argue for the transfer of dispositions rather than the transfer of skills.

**Toward Cross-Disciplinary Methodologies and Ways of Looking**

In order for policy to change, and for the arts to secure a central place in school, different kinds of conversations and different ways of talking about the arts and the relationships between arts and other kinds of learning are needed. Educators, the public, and policy-makers alike currently face the challenge of looking beyond quantifiable measures to address the intrinsic benefits of the arts (McCarthy, Ondatjee, Zakaras & Brooks, 2004). Existing theory and research suggests a need for more studies that go beyond correlation and transfer to address complex and relational contexts for arts learning across disciplines: why the arts matter, to whom and under what conditions. The Arts Education Partnership (2004) argues that arts education is out of synch with contemporary frameworks concerning cognitive and personal development and other strands of social science research, and makes an appeal for dialogue among scholars and researchers from multiple disciplines (p.3).
Alternatives to skills-centered and transfer models have been widely theorized and less studied in practice. In this study, I consider how the arts function as a site of embodied, critical inquiry in school, an idea that has significant theoretical and conceptual grounding from scholars interested in art across the fields of education, philosophy, art education, Buddhist teachings, and critical feminism (Dewey, 1934; Greene, 1995; Freire & Horton, 1991; Eisner, 2002; hooks, 1994, 1995; Bresler, 2004; Rich, 2007; Lorde, 1984; O’Reilley, 1993; Hanh, 1987) but less images in practice. Additionally, I look to studying art in school not as an autonomous entity, but as socially situated and constructed. In this way, I seek to contribute to a body of research that considers what it would mean to imagine the arts in the literacy curriculum in ways that do not simply consider how students meet an assumed end goal, but instead, how they think about art, what arts engagement means to them, and what kinds of knowledge it generates. Rather than skills transfer, I seek to better understand what the arts afford in terms of artistic ways of knowing, and how these ways of knowing relate to and are co-constructed within and alongside goals of literacy education.

The review of arts engagement in non-arts disciplines raises a number of questions that guide my study:

- What happens when we consider cognitive and affective realms of learning taken together?
- What happens when arts learning in non-arts disciplines is viewed as socially constructed?
- What happens when students’ lives and inquiries are taken as a point of departure in learning through art?
What happens when we consider of habits of mind as habits of being, and what can art afford the habits of being in the world?

My hope in considering these questions is, in part, to contribute to dialogue about what the arts teach by examining closely student learning. As arts integration continues to carve out a research agenda, it can be informed by some recent work in literacy education that has found ways of thinking about, teaching, and researching literacy as a socially situated process. This work is fueled by the idea that better understanding complex, socially situated approaches to the nature of teaching and learning with the arts will help us to teach better, help us to understand complex relationships between the mind and the body, help us to more fully understand our capacities for perception and how art contributes to learning dispositions in and out of school.

**Literacy**

**New Literacy Studies**

Literacy studies in recent years have sought to understand how students learn to become literate in a range of spaces both in and outside of school. Recognizing an array of language systems - both print, and non-print - that account for the ways students communicate with each other and engage in meaning-making, this decade has seen an increasing focus on multimodality and recently, attention to the relationships between and among the arts, literacies, and multimodality. Social and cultural perspectives and insights from the field of cultural anthropology, have influenced the way literacy scholars make sense of literacy learning as a social process (Bloome, 1986) and as “practices” situated within socially situated local and global contexts (Barton & Hamilton, 1998; Luke and Freebody, 1997).
Out-of-School Literacies

James Gee (1996) argues that children today are learning more outside of school about what it means to be literate than inside of school. Taking youth’s out-of-school literacy learning as a site of study, Hull & Schultz (2001) argue that research into how students learn outside of school can inform literacy learning in a range of contexts that include inside of school, and ask: “How can schools and classrooms, after-school programs, and other informal educational settings incorporate, without co-opting, children and youth’s sub rosa literacy practices?” (p. 603). Including forms of literacy that youth encounter in their out-of-school lives as part of learning is a way, they argue, of opening up the curriculum to a range of semiotic systems, and serves as a way of recognizing and drawing upon the growing role that multimodal and digital literacies play in young people’s lives. Taking as a point of departure the widening gulf between the privileged and the disenfranchised, Hull and Schultz (2001) argue that new relationships are needed to reconstruct often disparate domains of in and out of school learning in order to better serve students. This idea suggests that the work of building relationships between in and out of school learning goes beyond issues of engagement and student interest and carries with it a democratic agenda, one that is committed to making schools more welcoming and productive spaces for all students.

Arts, Literacy and Young Children

As mentioned in the last chapter, arts learning as a way of knowing has been more widely accepted, encouraged, and practiced with young children than with adolescents, and likewise, this inclination in teaching carries over into research. Although young
children are not the focus of my study, I turn to related studies here in order to consider relevant implications for arts-based literacy teaching and research with adolescents.

Wolf (1994, 1998), in her work with elementary students, argues that children’s engagement with classroom theater and drama is a way of shifting attitudes towards and enhancing teaching and learning. Edmiston & Enciso (2003) argue that the practice of drama has social and relational affects and serves to make classrooms more dialogic spaces. And Wolf, Edmiston and Enciso (1997) argue that drama engages students’ hearts, heads, voices, and hands as embodied literacy. Teacher research in literacy education makes an argument for multiple arts and a commitment to “language rich” environments that invite and make use of multiple forms of language extending beyond propositional print (Blecher & Jaffe, 1998). Medina and Campano (2006) argue that theater serves as an interactive platform in multilingual classrooms in order for students to generate knowledge and negotiate diverse perspectives. Other work has focused on engagement in cross-cultural imagination through visual art (Carger, 2004) and the study of art in relation to the writing of nonfiction (Wolf & Balick, Eds., 1999).

**Wholeness and the Education of Adolescents**

“Wholeness” has long been associated as a goal of art education (Burton, 2000) and again, more conceptualized as a framework for the teaching of young children. Parsons (2004) argues that “this kind of wholeness can be achieved only by students relating together their thoughts, feelings and attitudes in a more comprehensive understanding” (p. 782). There have long been alternatives to public education that assume a holistic stance to learning throughout the grades and where the arts play a central role in schooling, both in and outside of arts disciplines. Waldorf schools are one
example. Within a conceptualization of learning that takes into account the head, the heart and the hands, Waldorf schools make less of a distinction between aesthetic and academic work and the spiritual and interpersonal sensibilities of the child. Based on the philosophies of Rudolph Steiner, the core curriculum integrates tactile, visual, and musical sensibilities from early childhood through twelfth grade. Recognizing the role of the arts as critical to every stage of development, it is also seen as part of the ongoing development of the teacher and student alike, in order to develop a consciousness of inner and outer worlds through artistic work. Drawing from 18th Century artist and scientist Goethe, who envisioned teaching as an art, it is an approach that recognizes the aesthetic in all aspects of learning. Waldorf approaches to schooling consider “the what, but consider the how even more” (Easton, 1997); the process of learning and the approach to all subject matter happens with consideration as to how to engage the head, the heart and the hands in the topic or concept of study. Intended to engage the various senses, multiple forms of representation are implemented in the curriculum in ongoing ways and these forms and modes often employ many symbol systems simultaneously. The use of visual arts, recitation, story-telling, singing, music, creative writing, and physical movement, for example, foster the construction of meaning and understanding through multiple layers of feeling, imagination, and experience (Nicolson, 2000). While Waldorf education is described as the fastest growing school movement in the country, what Waldorf schools have typically not advanced however is a critical agenda, and a commitment to creating more equitable school learning.
Open Approaches to Teaching and Research

Likewise, also outside of the public realm, The Reggio Emilia Schools for early childhood have, for over thirty years, been recognized for their distinctive and innovative pedagogies that foster learning through multiple symbolic forms of representation. Recognizing the “many languages of children” (Edwards, Gandini, & Forman, 1995), the Reggio approach foregrounds metaphor and flexibility as an artist works alongside the classroom teacher and the child to develop their ideas in multiple forms. A significant aspect of Reggio is that children’s work is collected and documented over time and, as part of ongoing practice, is shared with students, parents, and colleagues, in ways that approach the work as a logic to be understood. Reggio frameworks make an assumption that “all children learn best when they can use multiple symbol systems to understand complex relations” (Edwards et. al p. 188). This idea extends into teaching which is seen as a form of research that is enhanced by the multiple data and forms of representation that are collected and studied; students’ drawing, artwork, poetry, and play, for example, are documented through systematic portfolios and record-keeping that includes photographs, artifacts, and transcripts of recorded talk and interviews with students about the nature of their work. Fundamental to this approach, Reggio conceptualizes the arts, not as a discipline but as a language, and the studio/classroom, “the atelier,” as a research site into what children know and understand. Theorizing is a project of both students and teachers as researchers, blurring the boundaries between teaching and research (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009). Despite the generative possibility of thinking about the implications of Reggio for older students, its target audience has been exclusively young children. I include references to Reggio here because it is a way of conceptualizing
teaching and research that offers insight into ways of teaching adolescents across a range of sign systems (multimodality) and forms of representation (art) and also sheds light on approaches to assessing and researching learning spaces where student work is not confined to print. Finally, Reggio approaches help me to define the parameters for what I am calling “arts-based” learning, as an approach to learning that inherently recognizes multiple sign systems, languages, and ways of knowing that students engage in to make meaning and sense of their lives and literacies. Here, the arts are not used as a way to enhance another area of study per se, but rather as part of that study itself.

Pat Carini’s work at Prospect School and Center in Bennington, Vermont offers further insight into forms of teaching and research that position art centrally, and provides images of learning outside of early childhood through such a framework. With a commitment to looking closely, to recording, reflecting upon, and describing, Prospect practices are grounded in a notion of “human capacity, widely distributed” and visible in all children (Carini, 2001). There is also an assumption that this capacity is realized in many forms of representation as students engage in the making of “things” and making sense of their worlds. Again, here the arts are not envisioned as a tool to support learning in another discipline, but as an important and integral part of all learning. The Prospect archives make visible the vast resources of students, and offer rich examples of the documentation of students’ learning over time and across a range of modalities. Like Reggio, Prospect treats teaching as a form of research and student as knowers and makers of language. At Prospect, it is assumed that through documentation, listening to students, and close looking at student work with others, the teacher will learn from the student in the interest of teaching them better. As researchers look to ecologically valid ways of
assessing and researching arts-based learning, and to demonstrating its value to multiple stakeholders, documentary processes such as Reggio and Prospect can inform these efforts. More qualitative and ethnographic research from the field of literacy, deeply influenced by anthropology, and informed by these rich documentary processes, would add dimensions to existing research in intersections between arts and literacy learning.

Play, Adolescents and Meaningful Work

As a teacher of adolescents and a parent of young children, I have come to believe that the principles that drive the engagement of young children in their play are relevant and essential to learning for adolescents and across the lifespan. Moreover, I have come to believe that these principles have as much to do with the democratic ideals of freedom and happiness that are generally under-prioritized in schools, as they do with cursory notions of engagement and motivation. Meier (1995), in her work with adolescents in school, argues for play as a way of thinking about designing meaningful engagement and argues that “it is boredom and anxiety that drive concentration away.” Meier’s framework for high school learning sought to provide opportunities where the learner was being fueled by his or her own interests in ways that are more commonly associated with young children than adolescents and adults.

Christensen’s (2000, 2009) teaching and research in public high schools takes adolescents’ lives as a point of departure to engage in meaningful work as both an individual and a collective endeavor, and as a starting place for critical literacy practice. Christensen approaches critical literacy from a standpoint committed to equality and “a belief in people’s potential.” This potential, as Christensen sees it, is not a vague ideal that circulates outside of histories and lived experiences in the classroom; it is a
fundamental stance that is pedagogically enacted with students through a range of forms of writing and dialogically-centered participation structures. Christensen argues that students, and all of us, need to learn “rising up” reading, not just how to read and not just for oppressed peoples. She argues that reading and examining society is both a form of engagement and a necessity in order to change the world and make it a better place. Although Christensen’s approach may not be framed as arts integrated, it is arguably aesthetically oriented; by co-constructing curriculum in ways that take into account, respond to, and build curriculum from students’ lives and interests, Christensen foregrounds the role of perception and sensory engagement in learning. Through drama, poetry, and multiple forms of writing, students engage in world reading in ongoing ways as a form of rising up that makes space for joy, outrage, and the pursuit of justice (http://www.nwp.org/cs/public/print/resource/3076).

In broad strokes, multimodal learning with adolescents has tended to focus upon digital literacies as a way of taking into account the lives of youth and youth culture outside of school. I draw attention here to several digital literacy practices that bear some resemblance to expanded notions of art, although they are not described or theorized in terms of art, but instead in terms of multimodality. For example, studies in youth culture and digital media have recognized the power of story in identity construction for youth and call for expanded conceptions of what it means to be literate in new times. Hull (2003) argues that familiarity with modes and media, building awareness about representation of the self and others, and opportunities to communicate critically, collaboratively, and with care, call for creating new spaces for media learning with youth both in and out of school. Hull & Katz (2006) argue that youth authors of digital stories
rely upon multiple modes to make sense of key moments in their lives giving voice to *agentive selves*. From a semiotic perspective, and drawing on the work of Kress (2003) and others, Hull & Nelson (2005) theorize the semiotic power of multimodality and argue that with digital and multimodal texts, generative power lies in the relationships between and among different modes. When students engage in multimodal composition through digital narratives, these scholars point to implications for storytelling, identity, performance, and agency.

In related work, Vasudevan (2006) takes up the subject of identity building in online and offline spaces through visual modalities as sites to author new selves. As part of this work, Vasudevan theorizes that new technologies make it possible to create and perform new identities that resist dominant ideologies by youth authoring themselves into new narratives as a form of counter-storytelling. Although it is not new for humans to use symbol systems to engage with ourselves, each other, and the world, and while these symbol systems change over time, multimodal theory and attention to modal affordance suggests that new representations allows for new insights and new spaces to understand self and others. At the center of each of these studies on multimodality are the lives and experiences of youth and their voices that have implications for in-school learning. Whether they be digital stories, online visual texts, or other emerging digital forms, research suggests that probing into concepts through new literacies is empowering and that this engagement is connected to identity development both in and outside of school (Tierney, 2005; Vasudevan, 2006; Hull & Katz, 2006; Hull & Nelson, 2005; Hull & Schultz, 2001).
Arts and Literacy, Taken Together

When it comes to specifically arts-centered engagement with adolescents and literacy, drama has been given the most attention. From a Bakhtinian perspective, Edmiston (1998) argues that youth’s engagement with drama led to considerations about moral complexity, and served as a way of entering and exploring multiple voices within and related to a shared and performed text. Edmiston argues that taking a Bakhtinian perspective is counter to mainstream discourses that privilege abstract notions of morality and justice as codes to live by, and instead offers a dialogic approach to drama as a way of challenging taken-for-granted, single-voiced discourses by making them more dialogic, more answerable, and more prosaic. Wilhelm & Edmiston (1998) argue for a process of “imagining to learn,” as students engage in inquiry and take on ethical dilemmas through performance and participation. Borrowing from Greene (1990), they argue that “naming, articulating, affirming the dissonances and contradictions in our consciousness, we may be able to choose ourselves as ethical in unexpected ways” (in Wilhelm and Edmiston, 1998, p. 82). By offering opportunities for students to listen to, consider, and be answerable to dissonant voices, Edmiston and Wilhelm argue that drama can promote a more caring and compassionate worldview when students explore and encounter multiple voices in themselves and in others. They see drama as a way of deepening and extending the platforms upon which students communicate with themselves and one another.

Drawing upon semiotic theory as a way of understanding meaning-making, Albers and Murphy (2000), in their studies of studio methods in middle school arts classes make the case to consider literacy in art. They posit that “knowledge about line
form, space, composition, technique, and media exemplifies what constitutes literacy in the practices of art” (p.1). These scholars argue for a studio approach as an alternative to more activity-based art programs in order to help students “reclaim their openness to representational possibility” (p. 121). Albers and Murphy (2000) argue that recognizing the function of art as a semiotic system leads to a broader definition of art that connects it closely to literacy. Finally, another important affordance of this studio configuration, Albers and Murphy (2000) argue, is the possibility for a “participatory pedagogy,” a pedagogy that is neither child-centered nor teacher-centered, but rather co-constructed.

More recently, Albers and Harste (2007) have linked the arts, multimodality, and literacy arguing that, “the arts, multimodality and new literacies, each with its own distinct principles, together, can redefine literacy and what constitutes being literate” (p. 18). While, up until now, much of the theory and research in multimodal literacies has not been concerned with art, and arts education rarely encompasses new and emerging literacies, this growing body of work gives attention to the intersections between new ways of thinking about language and literacy alongside perspectives from art. The intersection of these domains brings attention to the social semiotic links between literacy and art, while it also opens considerations of the imagination, aesthetics, creativity, and innovation. Scholars speak to the possibility in transforming traditional curriculum by reframing it within multiple modalities and the arts; they call for the need to redefine literacy to make it more relevant, in order to recognize what young people bring to school, and to make literacy accessible to more students (Albers & Harste, 2007; Berghoff & Borgmann, 2007).
The National Council of Teachers of English initiated, in 2007, a Commission on Arts and Literacies (COAL) to promote research and dialogue across the disciplines of literacy and art. As a research collaborative aimed at “furthering the professional conversation on where and how the arts, multimodality, and new literacies intersect with traditional, print-based literacies,” COAL and its members work to “identify pedagogically-sound strategies that substantively integrate the arts, multimodalities, and new literacies with literacy education to promote powerful learning.” With members who span K-12 and university settings, this work has focused on arts integration and multimodality in English Language Arts classrooms.

**What it Means to Teach through and with Art**

Looking to teacher education, there has been a call for more teacher learning in the arts (AEP 2004; Russell& Zemblyas, 2007). Given the lack of attention to arts learning for teachers in teacher education programs, it is not surprising that many teachers feel ill equipped and unprepared to make a space for art in their classrooms. In his work with teachers, Oreck (2004) focused important attention on teachers’ self-efficacy and self-image in relation to art and arts learning. He argued that teachers’ concepts of their own identities, self-efficacy, and self-image relating to creativity and artistry influenced arts use more than any other characteristic. While teachers in the study expressed a belief in the importance of the arts and a desire to integrate them, they cited obstacles being a lack of professional development alongside intense pressure to teach mandated curriculum. In a subsequent study, (Oreck, 2006) focused on teachers who implement the arts despite challenging restrictive environments. He found that for
these teachers, a willingness to take risks and a general creative or artistic attitude were more important than specific skills when it came to decisions about whether or not to include art. Neither prior arts instruction, current artistic practice, nor years of teaching experience were significant predictors of arts use in the classroom. In terms of what motivated these teachers to integrate the arts, they cited awareness of student diversity and a desire to improve student motivation and enjoyment in learning.

A Framework for Arts-Based Literacy

These intersections suggest many new possibilities for art and literacy education by necessarily changing the frame away from skills and toward making meaning through many discourses, disciplines, sign systems, and technologies, and asking questions about what school curriculum should include and why. These possibilities can only be imagined through intentional and sustained cross-disciplinary dialogue between literacy and arts research with an eye toward how these intersections can inform new ways of thinking about learning in this new century. More attention needs to be paid to the nature of what students learn from opportunities that are intentionally designed from these intersecting frameworks, as well as the design itself. It will require a shift in ways of thinking about how we research and make sense of multiple sign systems and learning at the intersections of these domains. New theoretical orientations are needed, new teaching and research practices, and new ways of looking, ways that can be informed by new directions in arts-based research (Eisner & Barone, 2011).

Research suggests that empirical study on the arts and literacy is needed to address arts learning, social justice, and democracy, and how the arts function as a site for intellectual and social activism (Eisner, 2000; Gadsden, 2008; Arts Education Partnership
[AEP], 2004). Drawing from social sciences such as language and literacy where we have gained insight into learners’ social and cultural experiences, research is needed that extends questions about cognition to consider broader questions of schooling, and the role of social context (Gadsden, 2008; AEP, 2004).

As literacy education evolves in the coming century, we would do well to consider what “education can learn [sic] from the arts about the practice of education” (Eisner, 2002). We would do well to (re)consider the role of aesthetics in literacy education in these times. This research is, in part, an answer to calls from both fields: what literacy research might learn from art about the practice of education, and what arts research might learn from the field of literacy education. Arts-based literacy is an important distinction in terminology that characterizes the focus of this study. As I have mentioned, most work related to art and literacy has been framed under the umbrella of integration, although in a few cases the terms arts-based and arts integration are used interchangedly. However, aside from Albers (2007), Albers and Sanders (2010), and Noblit and Wilson, (2009), the term arts-based is most commonly used to refer to arts-based research (Eisner & Barone, 2011). School policy documents at Tobin do use both terms, arts-based learning and arts integration. In this research, I inquire into and theorize the construction of arts-based literacy. This study is in many ways an inquiry into the question: what is meant by arts-based literacy learning, and what are pedagogical possibilities and challenges associated with it in secondary schools?

Additionally, as mentioned in chapter one, I draw on aesthetics to frame a particular approach to art that is embedded in issues of perception (Dewey, 1934) and the imagination (Greene, 1995). As such, this opens up inquiry into the connections between
critical literacy and aesthetics, since they are both related to perception. An approach to arts-based learning that foregrounds the role of aesthetics and perception positions this work to address both a range of modalities and forms of representation alongside larger issues of schooling and democracy. While the role of aesthetics is given a nod in many empirical studies about art, it is rarely central to the focus of the research; while aesthetics is sometimes referred to in empirical research on the teaching of literature, it has been less taken up in relation to literacy. Urmacher (2010) and his colleagues describe what he calls an “aesthetic-transformative model” of teaching and learning applied broadly to the curriculum that fulfills Dewey’s notion of the aesthetic experience that encourages unforeseen connections. Elsewhere, from a cultural studies perspective, Mission and Morgan (2006) take up notions of the aesthetic in relation to critical literacy although their study is text-based, working toward an understanding of textuality and how texts work. Additionally, its parameters are limited to what they call “leisure” text – a wide definition of literature that includes comics, TV shows, and movies, for example, but not other forms of art. I draw heavily on Mission and Morgan’s (2006) argument that “the aesthetic and the socially critical are not opposed to one another but, rather, are necessary, complementary components of a rich literary practice” (p. 4) and that the aesthetic “acknowledges the breadth, diversity, and even contradictoriness of human experience, as well as the drive to make sense of it” (p. 226). Alongside the inquiry into arts-based learning, this study is, in many ways, an inquiry into the question: what role can aesthetics play in literacy teaching and learning with an eye toward more democratic visions of schooling?
Chapter III

Teacher, Student, Researcher, Policy: Education Research as a Fusion of Horizons

Epistemology

Informed by work in the field of practitioner inquiry, I draw less of a distinction between notions of teaching and research. Positioning the researcher as a “learning self” (Ellsworth, 2005) leads to me to a research design that is embedded in pedagogical epistemology and positions me alongside teachers and students in this study as learners. Drawing upon the scholarship of British psychologist Winnicot, Ellsworth conceptualizes pedagogy “as design” and argues that through a set of designed experiences and conditions for learning infused with “pedagogical intent,” conditions might be set for new learning to arise. Teaching and learning is seen in this way, as “open to the future, always in the making, never guaranteed, never fully achieved” (Ellsworth, 2005, p.175). This view of teaching and learning, in opposition to transmission-oriented approaches, resonates with Dewey’s emphasis on experience, (1934, 1938) and Freire’s (1987) passionate arguments for a pedagogy of possibility. I find these ideas helpful in
conceptualizing my research from a learning stance and in constructing an open study
design that intentionally creates possibility and opportunity for learning through the
fostering of conversations around shared problems. Resisting the notion that uncertainty
necessitates lack of structure, I intentionally aim to design this study for both structure
and uncertainty. In these ways, and drawing upon notions of the learning self, I
conceptualize the research design as a learning event, not unlike how I envision teaching.

I situate this study within a constructivist epistemology and a mode of reasoning
that is grounded in Heidegger’s (1962) notion of “being in the world.” Conceiving of
reality as semiotically mediated rather than objective, this mode of reasoning enables
what Gadamer (1960) refers to as “the fusion of horizons,” that is, learning is not the
function of technical tools, but emerges through engagement with horizons of experience
within a human community. Hinging on the notion that all meaning is constructed
through our engagement with the world, this view of knowledge helps me to account for
social, cultural, and individual forces that constitute lifeworld understanding and to
consider how these forces both permit and limit what can be known. Through this lens,
meaning is not assumed to be objective or discoverable as an inherent fixed referent but
rather constructed through interaction within a social context that is geographic,
historically situated, raced, classed, gendered, and involves a host of factors related to
identity, power, and relationships, each informing multiple realities and positions.
Engaging in research in this way, helps me to pay attention to where knowledge comes
from while acknowledging that all knowledge is partial and perspectival. In this way, I
envision an active epistemology, requiring recursive and intentional knowledge seeking
and knowledge troubling.
Within a constructivist epistemology, I approach this work through an interpretive, hermeneutic paradigm in order to attempt to describe and understand the relationships between what was learned here, and the conditions under which that learning was enabled (and restricted). Motivated by questions of how and why, I am interested in both the practices of the participants and the meanings that these participants associate with these practices. I am interested in the particulars over generalizations and, in description over explanation, in the hopes of demonstrating the complexity of school learning environments as social, fluid, cultural spaces. Since much of arts education research in recent years, as detailed in the last chapter, has been called to justify itself within a logic of transfer, correlation, and explanation, this study aims to draw from what has been learned about social context and knowledge construction in recent years in qualitative research in literacy education. An interpretive hermeneutic theoretical framework affords a view of literacy and art taken together within the complex social phenomena of the culture of a classroom and is a way of looking that assumes understanding of parts happens in relation to wholes, that is, that the understanding of human phenomena is predicated on understanding the context in which that phenomena is developed and enacted. These epistemological and theoretical frameworks afford useful lenses for studying perception through art, aesthetics, and literacy. Since perception is an act of interpretation, it is situated within historical, local, and fluid social dynamics. It is an epistemology that makes space for different truths, concepts of knowledge, and ways of knowing, and is therefore useful to the study of arts-based literacy learning that attempts to consider what can be known from art, through art, and with art, and what ways of knowing are enabled and limited through arts and literacy engagement.
Within the “interpretive turn” in social sciences toward qualitative research that is conducted within a constructivist epistemology, scholars in the field of literacy education have been interested in how literacy functions as a social practice rather than as an autonomous, fixed set of objective skills or tools (Scribner & Cole, 1981). Literacy research in recent years has considered learning as a situated, sociocultural process in which the context where knowledge is developed cannot be detached from, or considered as ancillary to learning and cognition. Literacy, when recognized as social practice, is infused with social and cultural meaning (motives, beliefs, rules, discourses, values) and the study of literacy has taken into account a range of social and cultural influences upon learning. Bringing these ways of looking to arts-based literacy learning is central to my inquiry.

Drawing from literacy research, teacher education, and practitioner research, I consider the notion of practice as a unit of analysis. Heath’s (1983) landmark study, *Ways with Words*, approached literacy learning from an ethnographic perspective in efforts to understand how children in three communities, over time, participated in literacy “events” that were uniquely constructed within their social environments. Street (1993) went on to study literacy practices as constitutive of literacy events and the ideological preconceptions in which they are embedded. Britzman (2003) approached practice from the standpoint of critical ethnography to study two teachers learning to teach and raised the question about what practice *does* and *means* those who engage it. Her work invites a consideration beyond what students learn to what teaching and learning means to the teachers and students. The notion of practice signals an epistemic shift toward understanding literacy as situated within a social context and as something
that is developed over time as a way of interacting with language. The study of practices, situated in events, can illuminate ways of being in the world, informed by ways of engaging in human communities. Scholars in literacy education, teacher education, and teacher research have been interested in questions such as: What ways of acquiring and practicing language lead to what ways of performing, being, and interacting with language over time, both in and out of school? How are these ways of being and relating to language solidified over time in certain contexts and to what consequence for learners? Bourdieu’s (1990) social theory has informed notions of critical social practice, further defining a constructivist approach to knowing and perception that considers the relationship between practice, social systems, ideology, and power, and related notions of social reproduction when practices go uninterrogated and uninterrupted. Related questions in the field of critical literacy research have included: What effect do ways of interacting with language have on the culture in which the practices were constructed, and opportunities for change in ways of being, habits, perceptions? How might schools be envisioned as more democratic places that serve as sites of transformation and offer more equitable opportunities for students?

I envision critical, embodied approaches to learning that recognize the mind/body as a locus of perception. Neitzsche spoke of an “embodied reason” which he set against the Cartesian/Kantian mind/body dualism that still dominates Western world philosophy. Embodied theories of learning also situate the mind/body among other mind/bodies, highlighting the relationship between perception, the body, others, and the world (Merleau-Ponty, 1967). These notions, theorized for the last half a century and more, and central to feminist epistemology, are highly oppositional to current policy and practice in
educational reform that promotes the mind/body split and views knowledge as a function of individual action. Varela, Thompson, and Rosch (1991) bring together Gadamer, the phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty, the hermeneutics of Heidegger and Gadamer, and Eastern Zen Buddhist philosophy to understanding learning as situated and experienced in the body as a biological system, and argue that learning cannot be fully understood through disembodied talk and in the absence of human-world relations. Considering a full range of embodied dimensions as modes of perception, and the meanings and purposes they hold for students, including the role of the emotions in art and in literacy learning and social justice, are central to the inquiry of this study.

An embodied theory of learning considers the social context as an ecological system and the participants as mind/body beings within that system. Embodied and ecological approaches holistically consider the integration of the cognitive, emotional, and aesthetic aspects of the person and of the experience. From a situated learning perspective, an ecological and embodied approach requires the rethinking of binaries as complex relationships – the mind/body, the intellectual/emotional, art/science, teacher/student, researcher/researched. It is an approach that is especially relevant to the arts, literacy, and aesthetics because it takes as a point of departure a philosophy of the body and mind that works against the dualisms of Western philosophy in an attempt to see students and teachers as whole and schools as institutions as places embodied places of learning.

As a way of conceptualizing these relational spaces, I look to the notion of situated learning, which describes a relational approach to learning as a social process whereby knowledge is co-constructed among participants within communities of practice.
(Lave & Wenger, 1991). In this way, I see my work in the classroom as a community of practice, the school as a community of practice, and my relationship with the teachers as a community of practice, and each of these communities as intersecting planes of research that co-inform this study. Additionally, the notion of communities of practice considers learning to be situated, collective, and sustained around the shared interests of practitioners. In this study, I take up questions among teachers and students in order to solve meaningful “problems of practice” that relate to the work of what it means to learn through art and what it might mean to learn better. Working with and alongside two teachers, we shared a commitment to work that privileges local knowledge and inquiry for transformative teaching, learning, and schooling (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999; 2001; 2009).

**Approach and Methods**

Drawing from a range of tools for data analysis, I look to Denzin & Lincoln’s (2000) metaphor of the qualitative researcher as “bricoleur” to best capture the messiness of the process that they describe as “a complex, dense, reflexive collage-like creation that represents the researcher’s images, understandings, and interpretations of the world or phenomenon under analysis” (p.3). More specifically, I look to ethnography, practitioner inquiry, and narrative inquiry as research traditions to inform my methodological approaches. Through close looking, listening, and documentation, I seek to render this research as one story, a story about how several teachers, their students, and one researcher went about the challenges of thinking about teaching and learning through an epistemological frame where the arts serve a fundamental purpose in literacy learning. I attempt to capture rich images of the nature of the learning that took place and was
negotiated. In doing so, I hope to render an account that is both empirically sound and ecologically valid to the complex learning environments that I imagine schools to be.

I look to ethnography and its origins in anthropology and sociology to situate myself as someone immersed in a site over time to understand holistically the ethnographic question, “what is going on here?” as a way of understanding arts-based literacy. My immersion in this site as a participant observer affords access into emic and etic perspectives on this question, which when foregrounded through student and teacher voices, offer multiple perspectives on the nature of the learning that is taking place. An ethnographic approach makes room to explore in this study the relationships among ideology, methodology, and frameworks, which I consider important in terms of understanding the nature of what kinds of knowledge are being generated here, and what use this knowledge might serve in the world.

From practitioner inquiry, I frame this work within a logic that accepts, welcomes and foregrounds uncertainty. From my work as a public school teacher, a curriculum leader, a literacy coach, and now a teacher of graduate students, my questions have stemmed from this work in a range of schools and classrooms over time. Borrowing from Britton (1987), I view teaching as embodying processes of inquiry and knowledge-generation that he referred to as “a quiet form of research” (p.13) and in this way, consider these past experiences as important to and informing of my current praxis. I continue to see myself as a teacher first, researcher second. From this standpoint, this study seeks not an explanation, as much as a rich image of learning that might inform educators and researchers working in related spaces. I have come to believe, as Susan Lytle has said, that inquiry both stems from and generates questions. It is my hope that
this study sheds light on some questions and raises additional questions that may be useful both within this site of practice and beyond it. I make no claims for certainty, and intentionally and over time, interrogate my own work toward enacting inquiry as a stance (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009). In this way, I seek what Carini refers to as “inspired ways of looking,” where knowledge is generated from a phenomenological and descriptive epistemology, and where teacher talk and oral inquiry, are considered to be a central educational and epistemic activity (In Himley, 1991, p. 57). Finally, through practitioner inquiry, I uphold a vision of teacher learning that assumes learning is not individual but collective, that knowing more and teaching better are inextricably linked, and that these ideas are connected to larger questions about the ends of teacher learning and a democratic agenda – what the purposes of learning should be and its consequences (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999, p. 293/296).

I look to narrative inquiry for its rootedness in social science, philosophy, and the arts. As an alternative to the paradigmatic mode, narrative favors the specific and the particular over the general or universal. Like Richardson (1997), I see narrative as both a mode of reasoning and a mode of representation, and recognize that it seeks not to prove, but to show, to demonstrate, or to make visible. As a mode of reasoning and inquiry, I wrote to make sense of data, to find out something I did not know before (Richardson, 1997). I wrote my way through the process of data analysis believing like Richardson and St. Pierre (2005) that “writing is thinking, writing is analysis, writing is indeed a seductive and entangled method of discovery.” As a mode of representation, narrative serves as an organizing framework for human experience; it affords situating action within a social context, and it affords insight into the meanings that participants attach to
experience. Through story, we come to know what cannot be known through proposition. Particularizing experience, it affords the representation of contradiction, multiple perspectives, and what Richardson (1997) has called “crystallization” versus triangulation. Crystallization, Richardson argues, is a way of approaching educational research that seeks to learn through a variety of meaning-making perspectives that deepen over time (p.92).

These ways of looking, taken together, inform how I approach the design of this study and its representation. I lean on these traditions in ways that help me to construct meaningful and situated ways of making sense of my questions within the context of my experience and in the company of teachers and students at my site. They serve as a way of organizing the work I am trying to do in order to understand the perspectives of teachers and students, in order to understand both the affordances and challenges of designing and enacting arts-based literacy pedagogy with adolescents, and in order to understand what purposes this pedagogy serves the institution of school and the interest of its participants.

**Teachers, Students, Researcher**

The site of my study was a public high school in a large northeast city. Over the course of the 2010/2011 school calendar year, I visited Tobin Arts Academy three mornings each week from September through June. During that time, I worked alongside two teachers and fifty students in two ninth and tenth grade English classes. I entered the study with initial research questions that had emerged from my work in schools, and that I had developed through coursework in a doctoral program in literacy education. Although it was important to me that my role be that of a participant observer/immersed
ethnographer, not knowing the teachers with whom I would be working, I entered the study with an open design, where the nature of that participation could evolve over time according to the interests of the teachers and as my research took shape. For example, originally, committed to a belief that student voices matter in policy and practice, I sought to represent student voices on the subject of arts-based literacy as a pedagogical practice. Believing that not enough is known about how adolescents might engage with art in sustained and meaningful ways in schools, and about pedagogies that support this kind of learning, I sought to focus on the students. However, I quickly discovered that in order to understand and situate the students’ experiences, it was equally important to understand the teachers’ practices as well. By watching students, I became drawn to the idea that reconceptualizing literacies for urban youth also requires understanding what it means to teach them (Lytle, 2006). To examine practice, I found it necessary to work with and listen to both teachers and students over time. As such, my study foregrounds three perspectives. Because I sought to make sense of what was going on here from an ethnographic perspective, it was important to me to include the voices of students and teachers, as well as my own voice as a researcher.

My Role

My work with teachers evolved as well. Both of the English teachers I observed were new to the school the previous year and when I initially met with them they each expressed an interest in collaborating with me on arts-based pedagogies as a way of addressing the school’s mission to integrate the arts across all subject areas. I went into the study viewing my work as joining these teachers in taking on this challenge, but uncertain about the nature of this collaboration. Having worked with teachers as a
literacy coach, and as a curriculum and instructional leader, I was familiar with a range of configurations for collaborative work and had previously found it important in working with teachers to draw flexibly upon different configurations such as coaching, collaborating, and consulting.

Initially, still within an emergent design plan, I imagined that our collaborative work together might involve co-planning and the kind of collaborating I had been used to in schools. Over time, however, the nature of the collaboration took shape in other ways. My conversations with teachers took the form of recorded, semi-structured interviews in addition to ongoing informal conversations before, during, and after class, officially meeting once bi-weekly. When I met with each teacher, we talked about teaching and about goals and intentions – we talked about where the work was coming from, and where it was going. But over the course of my time at the school, our work did not involve co-planning. Instead, our collaboration became more along the lines of what we came to call “thinking partners.” At times, we would think through what had happened in the class and talk together to make sense of our different perspectives on what happened, and/or what might come next. Our collaboration evolved into one centered around sense-making and my work evolved into studying their design, and thinking, often with them, about how new pedagogies are invented, where ideas come from, the possibilities for the arts in literacy learning, and how students take up these opportunities that are at times unexpected or unfamiliar.

Through the year-long study, I became equally interested in the learning opportunities and experiences of the students and the biographical narratives of the teachers – I was drawn to the stories of who they were, how they came to their literacy
work in this arts academy setting, and how they were negotiating what they brought amidst the policies and context of their school and the larger district of which they were a part. Rather than viewing this as an unnecessary distraction to my work in studying student learning, I came to see this “thinking work” with teachers as fundamental to my project in understanding the work of arts-based literacy pedagogy in this context.

My time was spent in one section of ninth grade English (22 students) twice per week, and in one section of tenth grade English (25 students) twice per week. These sections were randomly selected and each class period was just under one hour long. During each visit, I observed and took written fieldnotes (107 hours) that were then typed and catalogued. As part of the fieldnotes, some discussions and activities were audio or video recorded and transcribed. In doing so, I sought to understand not a specific set of “best practices” for arts learning, but rather, insight into the ways in which one school was taking up their mission to learn in ongoing ways and day-to-day through and with the arts and literacy in these times. Rather than “best practices,” I was interested in practice more broadly at Tobin - the goals, purposes and approaches to arts-based literacy learning, and the nature of the engagement and literacy learning opportunities there. Rather than a program, ideas about delivery, or specific projects that have been successful for replication, this is the study of approaches to arts-based pedagogy, and it is the study of how this work was taken up in two classes.

By including two teachers and their classes, I aim to communicate, not a comparison, but to illuminate a range of ways of taking up arts-based learning in English class as part of a commitment to the idea that there is no one best way. While I visited two classes for the study, I treated the data sources from both classes as a whole. Since
this is not a comparative study, my emphasis remained centered around the teaching and learning that was taking place across these two classes and in the context of the school and through rich description, I do my best to situate each event within this configuration. It is my hope that a study of the pedagogy, over time, through rich images and analysis, can yield insight into ways of thinking about and approaching arts learning, literacy, and inquiry, and that these images and analysis could be relevant or put into conversation with work in other contexts.

In addition to conducting interviews with students and teachers (40 hours), I spent time informally talking to students and teachers outside of the classes I observed, and spent time around the school, attending school functions, such as the holiday program, art openings, theater, music, and dance shows. This was especially important because the school as a whole shares a commitment to arts-based learning and it was important to understand the school culture in relation to this commitment. From the two classes, I collected artifacts including formal and informal student writing, teacher lesson plans and syllabi, multimodal projects, and artwork. I took photographs of student work, collected school and district information, and conducted formal and informal interviews with the principal, teachers of other subject areas, and additional school personnel in order to situate my work within the culture of the school.

My role in the classroom evolved as well. During class, I took fieldnotes in the large group and, at times, participated in discussions after both teachers and I decided that it would be beneficial to both students and my study to become part of the classroom culture. In smaller groups, I circulated and joined conversations with students on a regular basis. As happens in teaching, sometimes the nature of my interaction with
teachers was a function of whatever the day demanded. Early in the year, setting the kind of school culture that she desired with ninth graders new to the school, a teacher and I talked about discipline, and about how to create the conditions for the kinds of respectful talk that she desired. On other occasions I would talk with teachers about a student that seemed especially withdrawn, and share our observances or notice together how a particular unit of study or topic of conversation engaged someone unexpectedly. Some days, there were crises that had to be dealt with, and I had to be ready to take over the class if needed; other days things got in the way of being able to find time to talk. The pressing needs of the day took priority over lofty research goals; at times, when one student was hit by a car at the end of the day, when a student was removed from her family, or it was discovered that someone was without a home, research took less precedence.

But within the demands that sometimes distracted us, it became clear to me over time that this issue of how teachers and students take up literacy learning through and with the arts not only mattered to me, it mattered to the teachers, to the students, and to the school. As the principal put it to me when I first approached her about this study: “We need research. Teachers need research, and the public needs research.” This sense of urgency and passion about why our work together might matter was echoed by students throughout the study who were eager to share the kinds of learning that they valued and what they believed to be possible for adolescents in school.

Semi-structured interviews with students were conducted outside of class during their advisory periods or at lunch and were based upon an interview protocol and adapted according to individualized questions emerging as follow-up to the events of the class.
(See appendix for sample interview questions). The selection criteria for the twenty-two interviews that I conducted with students across the two classes sought maximum range and variation according to a set of criteria that I developed and vetted with the classroom teachers. These criteria included: incoming schooling experience (public neighborhood, charter, independent, parochial, home and cyber school); racial and ethnic background (Hispanic, African American, Caucasian); career goals (science-related, arts-disciplinary, humanities and social sciences, and arts-related disciplines – such as architecture and engineering); disposition in class (quiet, outspoken, range of engagement); students with special needs (autistic, learning support); religious background (Jewish, Christian, Muslim, atheist); and arts major (fine arts, media, graphic arts, vocal, instrumental, theater, and dance). These criteria and selections were chosen in consultation with the teachers and adapted as I understood the range of backgrounds of the student body. The criteria was reviewed and modified to include a range of histories, identities, observed dispositions in class toward school, learning, arts foci.

**What I Bring**

Prior to my work as a graduate student, I have been a teacher of adolescents for eleven years, worked with teachers on the teaching of adolescent literacies as an instructional coach, as a building instructional leader, and have worked as a district literacy curriculum leader. Over the years, I have become increasingly interested in the role of the arts in life and in schools, in my own teaching and learning, and in the lives of the students I teach, and have been troubled by a school landscape that veers toward being increasingly devoid of art. I have worried about the ways that the sterilization of the school environment has contributed to the unwelcoming effect that school has on
many children, an effect that has been overwhelmingly exacerbated for poor and minority children in increasingly restrictive school environments.

My inquiry, like many inquiries, has been informed by a lifetime of informal study, interest, and research about the arts. As a child, I sought out and gravitated toward art to pierce the geographic, social, and ideological isolation I felt growing up in a small, rural, fishing village. Raised in this community and attending a mixed grade, consolidated school with no arts programming, arts curriculum, or arts-based teaching, my own sources of art encounters came outside of school. Although of modest financial means, boredom at home was dissuaded by an encouragement toward reading and making things. The earliest books I remember as art, and as a feast for the eyes, books with moving parts, inside/outside books with transparency film in different colors that you could peel away to reveal the insides of things - castles, villages, nests, worlds underground- pop-up books of elaborate circus scenes, field guides and reference books with detailed illustrations, and a book with a removable mirror that reflected a distorted image in its original form. I relied on language for insight into other lifeworlds and as a way of understanding people and places I had no other way of knowing. Books and art were always available. Music was omnipresent. My father, with the calloused, able hands of a string bass player, would gather with others our kitchen or barn to play all types of music – jazz, bluegrass, dixieland, classical, and rock and roll. With a problem-solving mind, he showed us that anything could be done with the curiosity and resourcefulness. My mother, a painter, a teacher, and an expert at making do and improvisation, taught us the value of making something out of nothing – in making art, in the kitchen, around the home. You wouldn’t think of going out and buying something to
solve most problems, a mindset common in the Maritimes, with limited access to things; the first step was to make do, devise something, or invent a temporary solution. Besides books, music, and visual art, much of the art I knew was of a practical kind, the kind that emerges out of necessary ingenuity, and an orientating stance toward ambiguity that Sumara (1996) calls “good enoughness.” School, by contrast, was an altogether different endeavor.

When I first became a teacher, my best friend, also entering the profession, gave me a mimeographed text she had found somewhere that I have carried with me all these years, which speaks to the stifling conditions of deficit, transmission-oriented schooling that constituted my own experience and that undergirds much policy and practice today, especially in urban and rural areas. More recently, to its torn pages, I have stapled a quote by Maxine Greene (1995) that offers another image of school. She says: “For me, the child is a veritable image of becoming, of possibility, poised to reach towards what is not yet, towards a growing that cannot be predetermined or prescribed. I see her and I fill the space with others like her, risking, straining, wanting to find out, to ask their own questions, to experience a world that is shared.” As I entered the teaching profession, from my hunches and convictions, and fueled by how students responded to what I offered them, I sought to engage my students in literature and writing, a range of forms of art and life within this image of possibility versus confinement. Most recently, as a parent, I watch my own young children make sense of the world through art when I often need only provide them with the materials to do so. Through art, I see their minds sharpen in ways that are unique to the mind/body perceptions that art seems to engender. Their drawings and constructions and range of makings and doings teach me what it
means to be literate in ways that cannot be predetermined or prescribed. I bring all of this
to my work as a graduate student, where I have been energized by theoretical grounding
and possibilities for rethinking art and literacy. Moreover, my opportunities at the
university have allowed me to situate this interest alongside what I have come to
experience in my own life and in the lives of those around me. Through my coursework
at Penn, which has valued the feminist work of paying attention to lived experience as a
“rethinking ground” for the construction of knowledge and the self, I have come to see
that the process of understanding of the self is not unrelated to, but a precondition to the
understanding of others.

The School

Tobin Arts Academy is located on a busy through road in a working class suburb
of the city. As you approach the school from the highway, the surrounding buildings are
a mixture of residential and commercial; wood row homes, small single family homes,
and apartment buildings occupy this mixed space in which there is a sprawling shopping
mall a half a mile away, and a nearby Walmart. Pedestrians walk along the busy road
throughout the day and frequently cross the intersection on foot. The school is on the far
end of the city bus route, and at the beginning and the end of the day, students board
public busses along the main road to travel to and from school and cars and busses
frequent throughout the day. Directly across the street from the school are a church, a
branch of the Department of Human Services, and a local YMCA with a large sign
advertising free exercise classes and childcare. On the adjacent block, beside the
entrance to a major highway, are a public library and a 7-11. From the outside, it is not
immediately apparent that the two-level brick structure is a school; in fact several
neighborhood students relayed to me that before coming here, they and their families were not aware it was a school. The building is average in size, low to the ground, and without pausing to look you might miss the simple blue-lettered sign across the exterior brick façade which says, Tobin Arts Academy.

Not unlike many American public schools, Tobin Arts Academy has somewhat of an institutional look about it; there are limited windows and two large parking lots wrap around both sides. There is limited landscaping and no outside area for students, no playground or sport courts. During lunch, students stay inside and go to the cafeteria or the library and visit with their friends. There is a grassed playing field tucked in behind the school and students walk across the parking lot and down a set of steps to get there for PE or for playing school sports. Students can try out for volleyball, basketball, soccer, baseball, softball, and track. For some sports, students walk after school to a public playing field a half a mile down the road.

The building is an older facility, a converted middle school with a fresh coat of paint: electric pink and blue lockers line otherwise nondescript but clean halls. In places, various forms of art are displayed - portraits push-pinned to bulletin boards, sketches mounted in sequence, and in a few places, ceramics in glass cases. A small foyer now serves as a gallery of student work, displaying photographs along a cement wall, and animated clay figures on an open shelf. A large mural of colorful student work created by graphic arts students covers one wall. The school, as part of its conversion to an arts academy, has two art studios, a media lab, biology, physics and chemistry labs, music labs, a production studio, and a state-of-the-art, albeit small, auditorium. Conversion of the building to an arts academy required some concessions and creative use of space: the
cafeteria was reduced in half to create a dance studio. There is a large library/media center, but in it there are few books. Due to the cost of the arts facilities, the school has been working to finance the library and a PTA fundraising effort was underway at the time of this study to raise money for books. Each classroom is equipped with an interactive whiteboard and Web 2.0. There is one portable set of laptops available for check-out, in addition to two computer labs.

The entrance to the school is through a wide, double staircase, and some days, you encounter the chamber choir practicing here, the students lining the steps on both sides, and an animated music teacher conducting them from the center front and below. Even on days when students are not formally gathered to sing, it is not unusual to hear singing in the halls as students walk to and from class. One ninth grader, new to the school, in describing this phenomenon, recently conveyed to me, teasingly, a story about a student whose singing while running down the basketball court in PE class, led to several others joining in full, impromptu harmony. On any given day, handwritten signs are peppered throughout the halls of the school, announcing meetings and events for a number of after-school clubs: Spanish, step team, dance, tutoring, journalism, jazz, cheerleading, model UN, literary journal, art/clay, manga/anime, student assembly, Build-On, ESOL, jazz band, and Girls for Change. During state testing, scores of student-created signs were posted throughout the halls offering encouragement for the test-takers: Si se puede! Yes you can! You can do it! Like all schools across the city, two uniformed officers are permanently stationed here and entry to the school is firmly restricted.
The Students

Tobin Arts Academy (TAA) is one of eighteen magnet, special admissions high schools in the city. Having opened its doors in 2008 only to freshman, the school has been growing by one grade level each year, and during the fall of my year of study the school welcomed its first junior class. With an enrollment of 379 students in 2010/2011 (a number that will increase to approximately 600 over the next two years), the school draws its population from over sixty-two middle schools across the city, mostly public, some with charter designations, and some parochial. Although some come from the immediate, working class neighborhood and walk to school, for the most part, students travel to and from school through public transportation, sometimes transferring up to three times, both morning and afternoon. For these students, it is not unusual for them to catch their first bus at six o’clock each morning and arrive back home at six o’clock or later in the evening. The makeup of the school population in terms of ethnicity is 52% white, 28 % African American, 13 % Latino/Hispanic, 5% Asian American and 3% other. Just over half of the students, 51%, have been designated by the school district as “economically disadvantaged.” A total of 26% of students in the school have been identified as eligible for support services: 11 % special education and 14 % gifted and talented. In describing the students at the school, teachers and the school principal conveyed that students enter with varying degrees of preparedness and that this presents instructional challenges that they are, individually and collectively, finding ways to address.

Students at TAA chose to be here, and admissions decisions are made according to a process that includes application and a semi-formal audition. In talking to students
about their admissions processes, it was not uncommon for them to speak of their high school options in two terms; for the most part, they viewed their options as a choice between a special admissions high school or their neighborhood high school. Students entering ninth grade in the city can consult a Directory of High Schools, published by the school district, outlining three types of schools to consider, with a bulleted description of each school within the three designations. These designations include: 1) thirty-one 
neighborhood schools that have open admissions to students inside the feeder pattern and additional lottery selection for students outside of the catchment area based on availability; 2) fourteen citywide admissions schools that have lottery selection around admission criteria; and 3) eighteen special admissions schools, each with its own set of admissions criteria. Tobin Arts Academy, one of the special admissions schools, publishes its own school brochure specifying their admissions criteria: a strong academic record; excellent attendance; excellent behavior; proficient or advanced scores in Reading and Mathematics on the state test; and a successful audition in their chosen major. The first four of these criteria are not uncommon to special admissions schools; the audition requirement is designed specifically for and by TAA.

All applicants are required to perform their audition before a panel of staff, students, and artists in one of three arts areas: 1) visual arts (including fine arts, graphic arts, or media arts); 2) theater (including drama, creative writing/playwriting, or dance); or 3) music (including vocal or instrumental). Students generally self-select their audition material within a set of school guidelines. For vocal majors, students perform two pieces, one classical and another of their choice, the only stipulation being that the piece cannot be of popular content. Instrumental majors bring their instrument and
perform scales in addition to a piece of sheet music that is self-selected. Fine arts applicants bring a portfolio of their work in addition to sketching a still life on site during the day of the audition. Theater majors perform a one to two-minute monologue. Dance majors perform a two to three-minute choreographed piece in any style, such as ballet, classical, jazz, tap, or hip-hop.

Auditions are held over two weekends during the winter term. Parents are invited, refreshments are served, and although there is a felt sense of nervousness as students rehearse in classrooms set up as warm-up rooms around the school, the spirit is welcoming. Many students point to the audition as their first public performance and many of the same students have not, prior to the audition, received formal education in their chosen arts area. For example, it is not unusual for a student who is interested in theater to perform a monologue for the audition, never having performed or had a theater class or tutelage. Some students have taken lessons outside of school in music, art, dance, or theater, and others have pursued a talent, such as writing poetry, in school with the assistance of a teacher in or outside of class. Still others, have taken up an art form independently and outside of school, for instance through the self-teaching of an instrument, by writing in a journal, or by performing rap or spoken word poetry in their neighborhoods. One staff member, audition co-ordinator, and a parent of two students in the school, described the auditions to me this way: “It’s welcoming. Potential is considered as well. And interest. Students don’t need to be headed to Juilliard. But the nervousness keeps some parents from bringing students in” (Lyons, personal communication, May 4, 2011).
In talking about their application process, many students did articulate the school as “different.” When asked why they selected TAA, students in this study generally responded that it was because of the arts focus, but also because they had heard it was a “good school” and offered a “good education” aside from the arts. Quoting Lyons again: “This school is a college preparatory school. The academics come first” (Lyons, personal communication, May 4, 2011). Every student expressed a sense of pride and sense of accomplishment at having performed their audition and at having been accepted to the school. Students often communicated the sense that getting into this school would open opportunities for them in school and life that they would otherwise not have been afforded.

The Nature of this Arts-Based Model

The nature of the integration at TAA is unique in the sense that it is designed to be an entirely arts-based high school. In other words, in addition to strong arts disciplinary study, the arts are expected to be infused across the curriculum into all subject areas, an expectation communicated in the school mission, on the walls, by the teachers, principal, and students. Although ways of describing the nature of the integration varied, the expectation for integration was an idea widely distributed and understood to be a central aspect of learning. This particular relationship between the arts and learning positions the school as different from both a traditional arts school and a traditional high school. On the front of the school brochure, in simple purple font, is a quote from Daniel Pink (2005) that conveys a central understanding in the culture of the school: “The future belongs to a very different kind of person with a very different kind
of mind – creators and empathizers, pattern recognizers and meaning makers. These people… will now reap society’s richest rewards and share its greatest joys.”

The organization of the school both encourages arts experimentation and limits the number of arts classes that can be taken. For example, students may take one course offering in their arts area when entering the ninth grade and the rest of the school day (80% of their day or more) is spent in non-arts classes. Although students apply to the school in a specific arts area, in time, they are also positioned to explore arts disciplines outside of their audition domain, to experience a depth and breadth in their arts disciplinary study, and to encourage experimentation in other arts areas. In tenth grade, for example, students are required to take one additional arts elective in addition to their core subjects and are not required to declare an arts major until their junior year. Although several students I talked to complained about having to take arts courses outside of their audition area, a greater number of students expressed an appreciation for the opportunity to explore additional arts disciplines, and some even noted changing their area of interest/major in that process of exploration.

As I have mentioned, what makes Tobin a unique arts-based model is that in addition to its focus on arts disciplinary learning, it upholds a strong commitment to rigorous arts-based learning across the disciplines – learning through the arts. An alternative to arts academy high schools that prepare students for higher education and careers in arts disciplines and arts-related disciplines, Tobin identifies its mission as primarily college preparatory and academically-oriented. As described on their website: “Tobin is a student-centered community that encourages intellectual growth and curiosity while promoting academic excellence in and through the arts.” This positioning of the
arts as infused across the subject areas of the school operates on an upheld assumption that arts-based learning is a vehicle for the kinds of habits of mind and thinking that will prepare students to pursue a range of careers in science, technology, engineering and math, in addition to arts disciplines and humanities. To specify the kind of learning that is sometimes described by some as being “streamed” through the curriculum, during its first year, the leadership and teachers in the school articulated together and adopted their own six habits of mind - also referred to as core values, as a school-wide framework for integration. These school-generated six habits of mind include: imagination, communication, empathy, perspective, analysis, and commitment. Seen as integral to curriculum and instruction across all subjects of study, these habits of mind are posted throughout the school and serve as common expectations for learning.

**Literacy and Arts at Tobin**

Art and literacy, the focus of this study, are explicitly linked in the school’s mission and vision statements and connected to inquiry-based frameworks for learning:

Our special admissions school is based on the belief that the arts provide an unequaled opportunity to foster intellectual growth by connecting arts and literacy. Visual and media literacy skills will permeate all subjects at the high school. Reflective teaching and learning will be expected in every classroom with an emphasis on building a community of learners to be thinkers and creators, and who are preparing for college or professional careers. At the same time the school will prepare students to be participating members of a democratic society by engaging them as stakeholders in their education. The spirit of intellectual curiosity will be encouraged in and through the arts.

The vision statement for the school, suggests innovative potential for pairing the arts with new literacies as a framework for teaching and learning and transforming school.

Borrowing a quote from Eisner (2004), the vision says: “It may be that by shifting the paradigm of education reform, and teaching from one modeled after the clocklike
character of the assembly line into one that is closer to the studio or innovative science laboratory might provide us with a vision that better suits the capacities and the futures of the students we teach.” Throughout the study, this mission and vision is an important text that I draw upon in my work with teachers and students to understand how this work gets taken up and is understood.

The Teachers

Nora is currently in her sixth year of teaching and her second year at the Tobin Arts Academy where she teaches tenth grade English. Nora began her career with Teach for America and taught at an urban, neighborhood high school for four years before coming to Tobin. Nora brings involvement in choir and musical theater as an adolescent and more recently work with the Passport Residency Program Theater Company. Nora is an active member of local teacher communities and inquiry networks in the city and brings an activist inquiry stance to her teaching practice. She is a member of the National Council of Teachers of English, a teacher consultant for The Writing Project, and has blogged for a local urban teaching magazine. Additionally, Nora is a member of an urban teacher inquiry group, Struggles and Strategies, that has been meeting biweekly for three years to study teaching, read shared texts, share problems of practice, and present at conferences. In 2009 Nora received the Christian R. and Mary F. Lindback Award for distinguished teaching.

Elle is a ninth grade English teacher and the year of this study marked her second year of high school teaching. Prior to 2009, Elle taught freshman courses in composition, reading, critical thinking, and college math for one year at an urban two-year college. Elle brings an interest in a range of art forms; she plays the piano, has trained vocally,
and has studied studio art, all interests which influence Elle’s use of new media and visual literacy in the classroom. Elle is also a community organizer; she developed and co-ordinated BuildOn, a local and global community service network, has shared her work on 21st century education at a number of professional conferences, and is a teacher consultant for The Writing Project. In 2012, Elle received the Christian R. and Mary F. Lindback Award for distinguished teaching.

I spent the first several visits with teachers, one in the spring, and one over the summer, learning about their curriculum and their plans for teaching. I learned the questions that they were bringing to their work. At our first meeting, Nora expressed questions she had been raising about the nature of “integration and rigor”; Elle spoke of grappling with “old and new literacies” and how to negotiate them. I found that these questions among others, needed to be understood alongside my own questions, and this became an important consideration in our collaborative work.

Additionally, an open design allowed for a configuration of collaboration to develop among myself and the teachers that was responsive to our desires. This required consultation with teachers on our evolving roles and I tried to keep open the option of altering the format that had taken shape. Both teachers communicated a felt sense of reciprocity but the open design carried a certain amount of risk and uncertainty on both of our parts. Opening up one’s classroom to an outsider in an ongoing way requires a large degree of risk. As the outsider, I too felt this risk throughout the study, and tried to approach that felt sense of uncertainty with a trust in the collaborative relationships, and ongoing attention to notions of reciprocity. Not knowing what this reciprocity would look like initially, this notion of thinking with each other, seemed in the end to be of most
value to each of us.

Finally, this uncertainty was not limited to our work in the classroom. An open design that values working alongside teachers and students comes with additional challenges arising from its emergent, relational nature in terms of representation. One of the most challenging aspects of valuing multiple perspectives – the perspectives of teachers and students alongside my own - has been negotiating not only the design of the study, but my representation of others and myself and in relation to one another. These challenges have called for the need for me to continue to interrogate the relationship between the “researcher” and the “researched” in the act of writing (Behar, 1996). In efforts to do this, I have sought to find ways of keeping teacher voices present through emic and etic perspectives, rich description, dialogic accounts, and their own reflections. I look to Fine (1994) to “work the hyphen” of self-other and researcher-researched, to trust what is possible through negotiation, dialogue, and reflexivity, but still recognize the limitations of what I am representing as one slice - as a shared story but nonetheless one that I am telling and responsible for.
Chapter IV
Like ‘New School’:
Beginning with Art as Story

Introduction

In this chapter, I explore how arts-based literacy was designed and enacted around the notion of beginning with the arts in the lives of adolescents. Across both classes, and in different ways, I noticed that arts-based literacy curriculum started with the arts in students’ lives by positioning art as story. I aim to show how this positioning invited students to expand their ideas about what counts as text, and ultimately expand their interpretive and creative possibilities for how they understand, create and interact with a range of texts in their lives. This chapter is divided into two parts. In the first section, I look at how students’ lives were positioned as art and story and I explore how students engaged in and understood the work of constructing their lives as works of art. In the second section, I foreground how the positioning of art as story opened up notions of text to include a range of forms of representation and modalities. Through classroom examples, teacher and student voices, and my analysis, I attempt to show how students’
arts-based practices of engaging with art as story, and in particular constructing their lives as works of art, led to shifting orientations toward, and practices in, school.

**Like “New School”**

On the first day of school, the ninth graders, new to Tobin from schools across the city, found their way to English class for third period. The classroom was somewhat dim, and the music Pink Floyd’s “Another Brick in the Wall,” was playing through speakers attached to the computer. After listening to the song, and reviewing the concepts of literal and figurative language, the students watched the accompanying music video. The video depicts an assembly line and inhumane image of school; a student is derided for his poetry by a teacher and humiliated in front of his peers, students sit mechanically in rows and at the mercy of a teacher who demands an automated recitation for both the demonstration of content learning and for infractions of behavior. The image of a school classroom is juxtaposed with students in a factory, all wearing faceless masks, marching to a directive teacher within industrial machine imagery. It shows a mechanized, dehumanized, organization that escalates into rebellion as students literally “tear down the walls” of the factory/school. The scene cuts back, in the end, to the classroom, where it appears a boy has been daydreaming to the sounds of the teacher’s yelling and to the hypnotic choral recitation that fills the room.

The music and video served as the ninth graders’ first shared texts in the classroom, their first introduction to art as story. Taken together, the music and the video
told a story of school; students were invited to think about the notion of school-as-factory, to consider what makes up “the wall” that is torn down, and were ultimately asked to place themselves in relation to this story. In their journals, they were asked to write about their best and worst images of school and what they would learn and not learn in each. Extending the metaphor of the schoolhouse even further, Elle posed the question: “Is society a kind of school?” As an entry into ninth grade English class that positioned this school as potentially different, this led to talk in the coming weeks of what one ninth grader, came to call “new school,” a play on the popular phrase “old school.”

In a September reflection, Melinda wrote:

What I learned in English so far is that English can be taught “new school,” also that everyone can be themselves and be accepted. Another thing I learned is that the Tobin Arts Academy is not like other schools.

Beginning in this chapter, I attempt to make sense of what made this “new school,” and its relationship to how students experienced arts-based literacy. From the start, it was clear to me, and to the students, that this would not be an assembly-line production of school. Rather, this grounding orientation toward students, positioned them as designers of their own learning environment as they were asked to think about and articulate their desires for what school might be like if they could reinvent it. Importantly, this positioned them in ways that assumed they might know something about the kinds of educational opportunities that would be valuable to them, and that these ideas could be enacted and realized. By voicing where they had come from and what they had come to know and experience about school, they engaged in reflective and forward thinking and sense-making, what Maxine Greene has described as a first step in imagining what might be “otherwise” (Greene, 1995).
Following their work on “the wall” students were asked to create a visual body autobiography from a paper cutout meant to symbolize an abstract image of sameness. They were asked to transform the image into a symbolic representation of themselves where each feature, or symbol, represented something about them (for instance, the eyes were to represent their perspectives/how they see the world, the ground - the ground they stand on, and their hands - what they hold onto). In their first presentations to the class, they were, in three to five minutes, asked by Lorraine to convey a sense of themselves as an individual “emotionally, socially, and intellectually” within an articulated set of norms where the expectation was set that all would share and that “everyone’s story [would] be acknowledged.”

As their first piece of autobiographical work, the body biographies served both as initial inquiries into the self, and as ways of accessing other’s experiences. The visual form of representation carried particular affordances for doing this. Rendering themselves visually and symbolically, although not difficult in technical terms - drawings could be as simple or as complex as they wanted them to be - positioned students lives as works of art, to be constructed in ways that required representation and metaphor. It required that students find means of describing themselves in both visual and verbal ways that made room for a sense of playfulness and invention in their self-representation. The visual and symbolic form of representation required that students find ways of representing experience that involved moving from the specific to the general, from lived experience to imagery; it required translating their particular experiences into metaphorical form. When students translate between the general and specific, Maxine Greene describes that this both arouses the imagination and increases our capacity to
connect with another’s experience: “We begin moving between immediacies and general categories, as reflective practitioners are bound to do when they try to make sense. We see; we hear; we make connections. We participate in some dimensions that we could not know if the imagination were not aroused (Greene, 1995, p. 187). In moving from the particular to the general, the pieces served as a meeting place for students to recognize and see themselves in the experiences others. Students found ways of representing some collective concerns such as family, friendship, art, and identity. When Steve described, for example, his body-image with half of himself portrayed in oversize clothes this way: “sometimes wearing clothes that don’t fit me,” he conveyed an experience that many adolescents could relate to. When he described, “I drew mist for my background because I never had a clear image on my life,” he conveyed another image that would be felt by most people in the room. As their first assignment, the body autobiography served as place to begin to develop relational identities. Students were able to relate to one another across these humanizing metaphors, yet still identify themselves in ways that portrayed them as individuals.

Artistically, all students could participate in the symbolic representation. The form was conducive to representations of tension through imagery and juxtaposition; students didn’t need arrive at a singular representation. Whitney, for example, drew half of herself in a mime suit to convey her shyness, and the other half as a performer. Aniya depicted dark and light in her eyes because she saw hate in them, not peace like she wanted. I was struck by the ways that through all of this imaginative and relational work, students did recognize that they were addressing state “content” through art and story. They were aware that they were learning about symbolism, literal/figurative language,
writing, speaking - in ways that started with their lives and with art. That they could learn content through depicting and sharing art about their lives, at times surprised them and seemed to contribute to their ideas about “new school.” In a written reflection on the unit in mid-September, Alyssa conveyed a sense of surprise that she had learned a content standard in this way. She wrote: “I learned a surprising amount about literal and figurative meaning.” She went on to describe that the presentation in the second week of school “showed us how to be more open to each other in the classroom environment.” Alyssa was someone who had ideas about what English class should look like, ideas that were challenged throughout the year, beginning here, as she made sense of what kind of school this was, how it compared to what she has encountered in the past, and what was being learned here. What she seemed to be coming to understand was that art was not going to be ornamental or a gateway to content learning, it would be a way of content learning.

**Starting with the Arts in Adolescents’ Lives**

O’Reilley (1993) said, “in the average classroom there is not enough at stake” and went on to argue, “That is not worth our time. That is not worth our lives” (p. 119). As I watched and listened to students during the first weeks of school, I returned to this idea often: What would it mean to design curriculum that had something at stake for students? Students spoke widely and freely about school experiences that did not have enough at stake for them, about curriculum that felt disconnected to their lives, and they did not feel invested in:

**Raquel:** All we did was sit down and listen to the teacher. There was no arts or anything. We didn’t really learn a lot; we were bored half of the time.
**Melinda:** Yeah I would learn but in a blind way, if we would have just read out of the book and had to write an essay, like I would care about it, but it just doesn’t interest me.”

Seneca, spoke to her relief and excitement at finding that art and story and what interested her, could also be challenging:

My old teacher would never let us listen to a song or watch a clip to help us understand things better. It was like, take out your textbook, read the story, answer your questions, and then you’re going to have a test. … I’ve been in the city’s public schools all my life and they haven’t ever really challenged me. I came here and it was like – this isn’t easy – and I was so happy.

To be clear, students did read books, they did write essays, they took tests. But what stood out to them at this point in time, what they wrote about and spoke to me about as engaging their hearts and minds and imaginations, were art and story. These ways of talking positioned art as real work in school, as academic work, and as potentially putting something at stake. The three preceding comments from Raquel, Seneca, and Melinda suggest that art could help them learn, could help deepen their learning, could help them learn things better, and could make learning both challenging and rewarding. I found these to be remarkable claims that fueled a number of questions about arts-based literacy learning in Nora an Elle’s classes: How could arts-based learning be an alternative to learning in “a blind way”? What conditions made it so? How could students use a range of texts “to understand things better”? And under what conditions is this work seen as “challenging”?

In 1934, John Dewey defined what he saw at that time as “the nature of the problem” surrounding art and education, namely “that of recovering the continuity of aesthetic experience with normal processes of living” (p. 9). Nearly three quarters of a century later, this separation persists in schools, and is made increasingly significant
because students encounter and have to negotiate such a range of forms of representation and modalities in their daily lives outside of school. “To recover the continuity of aesthetic experience with normal processes of living” would be to reposition art in the school curriculum and challenge notions of art on its pedestal. Dewey argued the arts that have most “vitality for the average person are things he (/she) does not take to be arts” (p.4). Like Dewey, Nora and Elle embraced an expansive definition of art where a wide range of texts counted as art: music video, body autobiographies, poems, vignettes, paintings, and digital stories, were all positioned as art. Popular media counted as art. Situated here in these English classes, art was positioned by teachers as a diverse assemblage of texts that offered a range of perspectives that written texts alone could not. The design of a curriculum around the notion of art rooted in the everyday experiences and lives of students, sought to embody the kind of vitality that Dewey describes as a human desire in our lives outside of school. Speaking to this design, Alyssa described school as a place that “doesn’t feel like school” and that “it makes me personally want to wake up and come here every day.” The criteria for “recovering the aesthetic experience within the normal processes of living” (Dewey, 1934) seemed to play a large role in the design of “new school.”

Since this was an arts-based school, my mind often gravitated toward questions for other settings about the implications of the kinds of arts-based learning I was seeing here. Was this way of teaching English particular to an arts-based school? To this arts-based school? Although I never intended to generate findings that could be “generalized” to other populations and situations, I did wonder about what could be learned for other contexts. So, for example, although it makes sense that in an arts-based school art would
be important to the students who attend it, a ninth grade student, Raquel, helped me to think about implications of arts-based teaching for educating adolescents more broadly.

Well, teenagers these days – mostly – they like something art-related, like drawing, or theater, or dance or music. And you can all relate.

Raquel’s comment suggests that Dewey’s notion of “recovering the aesthetic experience within the normal processes of living,” might be considered as a way of engaging adolescents in meaningful work in school. Put another way, it suggests that we might consider what students bring, and create the conditions in school for the kinds of vitality that they seek outside of school. Alyssa’s comment suggests that she was learning in powerful ways that “felt less like school,” that met these conditions for vitality in unexpected ways. For Alyssa, this vitality came from a learning environment where through art and aesthetic experience she could still “learn content” (figurative language) and “how to be more open to each another in the classroom environment.”

The central role of art in the lives of youth was talked about in other ways as well. Mid-year, Ariana described to me, when I asked her if and how art played a role in her English class: “For me it’s the other way around: how does English play a role in art?”

Her comment reverses more standard ways of talking about art, as a supplement to a core class, as a catalyst for engagement in a core class, enhancement of content, etc., and instead positions art as central. Her question, *how does English play a role in art?* spoke to what mattered to Ariana, that is clear. And I am still not sure what to make of it. But, I do think it is suggestive of another way of thinking about a curriculum, a way of thinking about a curriculum that has utility to students’ lives. It suggests that English-literacy even - could be a means to something else, not an end in itself.
When I asked Elle about her planning, she spoke to her choice to begin with students’ lives by bringing in forms of text from their lives. She said: “People see art as art. But they often don’t see it as communication.” For Elle, this communication meant students using art to inquire into their own lives and what they bring to school, and also listening to the lives of others. Her pedagogy was informed by a strong commitment to preparing students to be active contributors in the 21st century, which framed her purposes for starting with students’ lives. I asked Elle how she went about designing curriculum with such a range of texts and modalities:

It’s intentional …but also when I get my ideas for teaching, I don’t read method books…When I’m at home I look at images or artwork, or I read things in magazines like The Economist, and like Time Magazine, like the Harvard Business Review… And seeing what kinds of jobs are out there, and what things/skills students are going to need, and how students will need to apply what they learn in school… and also how “awake” to the world they need to be to be innovative, and to recognize what is needed and what they have to offer to that need.

Elle’s rationale positions starting with art and students’ lives as works of art as integral to innovation: to start with students lives as works of art, for Elle, meant providing opportunities for students to develop an awareness of their own unique capacities, histories, talents, and desires, in order for them to imagine how those might be put to use. As the year went on, this framing would be a central starting place for the larger curriculum design will be fleshed out in chapters five and six.
Lives as Works of Art

What would it mean to consider the English classroom as a space where adolescents used art to explore, understand, and construct themselves as works of art? As Nakkula and Toshalis (2006) have pointed out, youth are in a near constant state of constructing, that “forming the core of an identity is the pivotal task of adolescence” (p. 18). By adolescence, we all have a cache of stories and interpretive possibilities in place for understanding who we are. At the same time, adolescents are, by necessity, experimenters with story; as they grow into adulthood, they test these stories, their own limitations with adults around them, with each other, and with, at times, risky behavior. They often seek alternatives to their everyday questions and struggles through story. By inviting storytelling about students lives into the classroom, and by studying stories as a process of selection, interpretation, and organizing themes, adolescents might better understand that the “construction of one’s life is a matter of authorship” (Nakkula and Toshalis, 2006, p. 6). In the next section, I will share examples of work that built upon adolescent development as a process of creation, authorship, and interpretation, through arts-based practices.

Postmodern thinking does not define the person as either predetermined or fully defined but rather in process and always in pursuit of possibility for themselves. In the first weeks and months of school, constructing students lives as work of art, positioned them as in-the-making, as open to revision and open to multiple subjectivities. The body autobiographies and the poems, vignettes, and multimodal memoirs that follow, required students to reflect on past experiences, understand themselves in the present, and imagine themselves in the future. As this suggests, the orientation toward life as story and art
required reflexivity; it required looking at narrative as a mode of reasoning as well as a mode of representation.

There has been much exciting research on narrative and the complex relationships between story and identity construction. Like feminist scholars who have problematized the notion of voice (Ellsworth, 1992; Orner, 1992; Luke, 1992; Kamler, 2001), I am electing to think about students’ constructions of their life texts as story, rather than primarily as individual expression (Calkins, 1986; Murray, 1983; Atwell, 1987; Graves 1983); or participation (Giroux, 1988; Freire, 1970; 1985, Giroux & McLaren 1989); or as project (Lensmire, 1998). I do so as a way of looking at this work as extending across difference, occupying relational space, and as complex constructions that are situated, narratively constructed, and interpreted (Grumet, 1990).

So, what opportunities did students have to construct their lives as stories? During the first month of ninth grade, students read The House on Mango Street by Sandra Cisneros, a collection of vignettes (poems/short stories) that portray the coming of age of a young Latina girl, Esparanza. At the beginning of the unit, students wrote two pieces - an autobiographical narrative vignette, “My Name Is,” and a poem, “I am From,” using the Cisneros “My Name” vignette as an anchor text. Written from the point of view of Esparanza, the vignette tells a story of her name, how it means “hope” in English, “too many letters,” in Spanish, and it describes how she might like to change her name - “baptize myself under a new name, a name more like the real me, the one nobody sees” (p. 11). I begin by sharing three texts from the ninth grade class to serve as examples for the kinds of work that, taken together, might be characterized as what I am calling the artful construction of agentive identities. In these three examples, I seek to show how
students engaged with ways of thinking about their lives in new ways, ways more commonly associated with art.

**Life as Open to Revision**

Alyssa chose to refine her vignette about her name and to share with the class. Prior to writing the vignette, she responded to a general question/prompt posed by Lorraine to the class, “What’s in a name?”

A name is a title every human receives at birth. It is a series of letters forming a personal label others will know you as forever. Names are important because of what they are used for and I believe they are, in fact, a necessity. A person’s name sticks with them forever and gives them a unique trait. I believe it is the first way in anyone’s life they may become an individual.

Several days later, Alyssa wrote a vignette called “My Name Is.” Below is the first of two drafts. The valence of the piece changes noticeably when she writes in the vignette form that draws upon her life experience. Here, she tells the story of her name:

My name is ugly, it is a size 9 shoe on a size 4 foot. My name is a book in the library, so common and traditional. My name is not me. My name is a club millions could join into. It is unspecial. It is a tag sewn into my life I am forced to wear always. Nothing I’d pick for myself. My name is Alyssa. The white crayon in a sixty-four pack of crayons. The last color I’d ever decide to use. Nonetheless, it is the term my father gave to me at birth, to define by the end of my life. Although I feel it is not mine to define, instead my cousin’s: Alyssa Baldacci. She was in the dictionary before I, and so my tag disowns me.

The juxtaposition of the two pieces shows how Alyssa’s writing changed when the ideas came from her life, and when the piece was framed as a vignette as opposed to a response to a question. The first piece is written in general terms and addresses a general and hypothetical condition. The response is similarly general; she answered the question: “a person’s name sticks with them forever” and “I believe it is in fact a necessity.” The second piece had an open framing, “My name is…” In this piece, Alyssa takes an inquiry
stance and becomes, through narrative, what Kamler (2001) calls a “textworker, someone who can work actively and consciously to shape the body of a text” (p. 178). She fills the text with different ways of conveying her name and with images to describe her experience. It is also an argument for why she disowns her name and why she believes it is not her. Days later, choosing to revise this piece because she said, “I felt it had more of an effect,” “it was most meaningful to me,” and it had “a greater tone,” she submitted a version of the vignette (as above) with an additional section projecting herself in the future:

But one day, my name will change. It will be a new tag on my clothing of life, and it will fit me perfectly. It will re-grow into the blossomed red rose it should have been. It will be beautiful. When I change my name, it will be something that will truly symbolize me. It will be different. It will be the needle in the haystack, it will stand out. A splatter on a white canvas, it will be new art. My new name will be the queen of the jungle, loud and strong. My name will be sweet like the icing on a baby’s first birthday cake. It will be as colorful as a circus clown. One day my name will be me.

Drawing upon embodied lived experience, the vignette allows for different kinds of understanding to emerge than less embodied writing. In this piece, Alyssa writes herself into understanding, into being in the world in a new way, with a new name. She actively engages her imagination to plan what will be, one day, when she changes her name. The “My Name Is” piece as a form, provided space for introspective exploration, even a moment of meta-awareness, when Alyssa describes her future name as ‘new art.’ Art can extend our existential repertoire. It can add to our range of possible subjectivities, it can allow us to rehearse other ways of being. Ursula LeGuin (1989) said that the imagination gets us “out of the bind of the eternal present” to the freedom of understanding “otherwise” when we “accept the unreality of the story” (p. 45). I was most struck by
how Alyssa’s piece conveys two distinct parts, the now and the future, to get herself out of the bind of the eternal present. Alyssa’s addition to the piece projects a course of action and the way she constructs the second half of the piece is in such sharp opposition to the first. The revised piece is entirely future-oriented, as she shifts from describing “what my name is,” to “what my name will be”: Her response, in effect, changes the question. The three iterations trace the path of a trajectory for Alyssa’s life as a work of art – from what is (generally) to what is (for me) to what will be (for me). As she constructs her dilemma on the page, she constructs a path for re-invention. Alyssa wrote in her written reflection on this piece:

I did not struggle with my composition because I found it meaningful to me. To my final copy I added double what I already had, and wrote about changing my name. I decided I’d like to do this when all of my fury became apparent.

This decision took on particular weight for Alyssa as she went on in the days following the assignment, to go by a truncated version of her name, Lys. In terms of the way that she lived herself into this piece of art, Lys’s vignette conveys the catalyzing effect of creating an identity through art, what Toni Morrison might call “radical narrative, … creating us at the very moment it is being created” (1993). In the process of designing, Lys was able to produce a new representation of reality and at the same time remake herself by re-negotiating her identity to become someone new (Kamler, 2001 p. 54).

**Life and Art as Narrative Exploration**

Nakkula and Toshalis (2006) remind us that notions of the self are always implicated relationally; how we see ourselves is always tied to how we see others and how we are seen by others. Students experimented with the construction of their lives as art in ways that explored their relational identities. Foucault (2000) described
experimental, transformational writing this way: “I’m an experimenter in the sense that I write in order to change myself and in order not to think the same thing as before” (pp. 239-40). Seneca took up the question: Does a name define a person or does a person define a name? She used the vignette as a site of inquiry and story as narrative exploration. Her story speaks to the idea that life as a work of art requires thinking about art as a story and that stories are constructed and open to revision. To the general question/prompt, “What’s in a name?” she wrote:

A name, in my opinion, means nothing, but at the same time everything. A name is a person’s identity but the only thing is, people make their name, the name doesn’t make the person. No matter what your name, you are who you are, and that will not change. Unfortunately, people let what their names are, or what they mean, control their life.”

In this piece, Seneca grapples with notions of identity as fixed (you are who you are and this will not change) and identity as fluid and constructed (unfortunately some people let what their names are, or what they mean, control their life). She takes these ideas up further in her “My Name Is” vignette. The piece was too long to include in its entirety, so I have excerpted it here:

My name is everything I am, anything I want, and all that I make it to be. I have a name that is just for me. To others it is just a name, but to me it is so much more than what others think it may be. Even though my mom gave it to me, I make it what it truly is, but at the same time, it makes me who I am. ... It is the name I hear when others need advice, or when I am called upon by another, whether that is for an award, or punishment...

She went on to imagine other ways of thinking about names:

Seneca’s self-portrait from fine arts class
I wonder how others feel? Do they like their name? Do they believe their name is who they are? Do others think about their name the way I do? Do they take in what it truly means, or is it just a title or label they go by every day? Do they know who they are, or are they still trying to figure it out? Do they know what they want, or what they need from life?” I do. …. I want all of my dreams fulfilled, and to have lived a life that meant something. I want to be remembered long after I am gone. My name will be the way I fulfill my desires. What is most important, above all else, I know who I am. I am the daughter of Danielle Levenger. I am Seneca Summer Levenger. Seneca, it is a Native American tribe known for their strength. Autumn, it is a name so beautiful, that my cousin and Grandmother said it had to be me. Levenger, it is a tale about my heritage. It shows my past, present, and future. My name will always be me, because it is a part of me. I am who I am, not what others see. I am not what others perceive me to be. I am what my name says. My name is me, and that is all it will ever be.

Stories have the power to make our infinite potential more visible. As Seneca imagined who she was in relation to her name, the writing was not a neutral task to be completed, but rather a site of exploration and inquiry into who she was and who she wished to be. In her vignette, Seneca, projects her curiosity, a powerful agentive self and a sense of urgency to know how others feel about their name and identity. The piece also shows how narrative as a form of research, honors the spontaneity, complexity, and ambiguity of human experience. On the one hand, in this piece Seneca wrote that “what is important above all else, I know who I am,” while on the other, in her written reflection, she wrote that she did not like to “open up much about myself…because I don’t really know myself.” Constructing life as a work of art made space for Seneca to be both a knower and not-knower. The arts, Eisner (2002) reminds us, the arts “invite the disposition to tolerate ambiguity, to explore what is uncertain… in the arts, the locus of control is internal, and the so-called subjective side of ourselves has the opportunity to be.” Most importantly, he argues, “this disposition is at the root of the development of individual autonomy” (p.10).
Lives as Art as Multiple Subjectivities

Rather than poetry taking its place as sanctioned during the month of April, National Poetry Month, it was positioned in the fall, as students came to school with a felt sense of newness (especially ninth graders entering a new school). Poetry seemed to serve as a beginning place, compatible with students’ uncertainties, their desires to know one another and be known, and to (re)invent themselves as high school students. Creating opportunities for invention, re-invention, agency, and openness to one another through ‘art as story,’ seemed to channel the energy that adolescents brought to a new space, creating a curriculum that was present and responsive to adolescents in that moment in time. It set the stage for positioning both a range of texts and students’ lives as narrative exploration.

When students shared their pieces, Elle created a makeshift performance space, using the projector as a spotlight, and dimming the lights in the room that emphasized the performative aspects of poetry and life story. For instance, Erin, a quiet ninth grader who seemed to prefer drawing to talking, delivered a moving performance of her “I am From” poem. Because she performed her piece on the second day, having seen the performances the day prior, she told the class that she was so inspired by the previous day’s public sharing, that she re-wrote her piece entirely: “I rewrote this because when I listened yesterday I heard people were opening up – so I decided that I could do that too. I had problems as a child and I’m dealing with them still… but I figured I’m going to be with you for four years…” The following is an excerpt from Erin’s poem:

I am from the crayons given to a little girl on her third birthday – the birthday of the young artist within.
I am the eight-year-long speech class that told me I was not right and the fear of speaking that came from it.
I am from the boondocks in the back of the classroom, thinking not of schoolwork but of stories that were drawn into the side of the workbook.
I am from the porch of the little old woman, who found the trivial rambles of a child in kindergarten so important, and the thought of not knowing what became of her or of her sick husband.
I am from the bulky hearing aid that caused so many tears, a lisp, and problems, but with the confidence of parents who refused to give up, and the strength I had to put it away for good.
I am from the make-believe game that we thought so real. The baby doll that made us the mommy, the Lindsay Lohan CD that made us the rock star, and the cheap plastic tiara that showed the inner princess in all of us.
I am from the role model that showed me being me was something I shouldn’t be ashamed of, and that reminded me what I was really dedicating my life for.
I am from the response of an art high school that I worked so hard to attend. One chance to be the person I am meant to be.

The form of the poem has the capacity to not only convey ambiguity but to hold disparate ideas in productive tension. In Erin’s poem, this tension often came from the juxtaposition of two lines with different valences, “the bulky hearing aid that caused so many tears, a lisp, and problems,” alongside “the confidence of parents who refused to give up, and the strength I had to put it away for good.” Likewise, “I am from the crayons given to a little girl on her third birthday – the birthday of the young artist within,” alongside, “I am the eight-year-long speech class that told me I was not right and the fear of speaking that came from it.” Her poem aptly communicates these parts of her life as existing simultaneously, and in the form of the poem she is able to render them as an aesthetic whole. Similar tensions are repeatedly juxtaposed in this poem where she found a place through poetry, a form of art that lends itself to contradictions, to write herself into an awareness of her own disparate voices. In her reflection, she said,

I learned a lot about myself while writing my “I am From” piece. I learned the little things I usually don’t take notice of, did shape me into the person I am today. On a single piece of paper, I saw a mirror of who I am... It was a bit
difficult to write such a personal poem, trying to figure out what the line would say to the listener, and how much of my life story would be revealed. I really like how it turned out in the end, and the story it told and it did make me rethink what I didn’t want to think.

Erin felt a sense of responsibility to tell her story from the heart, and her will to revise the piece came from within and as result of the social contract she felt with other students in the room. The arts have the potential to move students, to inspire them, to engage their minds and their imaginations. And this potential, as seen through this example, was leveraged by Elle’s curriculum design from day one. Kelly’s commitment came from both hearing other people opening up and deciding she could too, and from the idea that she had a long-term investment to make in the relationships with other students in the class.

Eisner (2002) said that “the arts, as vehicles through which [our] inscriptions occur, enable us to inspect more carefully our own ideas… they speak back to us, and we become in their presence a part of a conversation that enables us to “see what we have said” (p.11). As a visual arts major at Tobin, Erin was used to creating other kinds of art – mostly drawing. In her reflection, she conveyed a sense of surprise at what she found on the page staring back at her in this poem. She said: “On a single piece of paper I saw a mirror of who I am.” Interestingly enough, this mirror was not described as a single image but as a kaleidoscope of images. Art stabilizes ideas so that we see them in new ways; art about the self helps us to see ourselves in new ways. In this piece about her life, Erin conveys the act of writing the poem as a site of inquiry into her life that reveals multiple subjectivities, and multiple influences on the person who she is today. As she said, “I learned the little things I usually don’t take notice of.” Additionally, she made
considerations about her audience: “Trying to figure out what the line would say to the listener and how much of my life story would be revealed.” Her decisions about how to represent herself to an audience, speak to the ways in which she came to see her story as less a story to relay, and more a story to construct, and in the process, learn something about herself.

The choice to have students write about themselves and to share their work publicly so that all stories could be acknowledged, further defined what might be meant by “new school.” Eisner (2002) describes the curriculum as a mind-altering device; each choice about the distribution of the forms available to students, the kinds of thinking and dispositions that are engaged, the sorts of social contexts they help to create, have profound effects on what can be learned. Here, students learned early on that choice and range of form would be part of English class. They learned that their lives were rich sources of experience that they could learn from, and that school would be a place to learn more about themselves and each other. Later in the year, looking back on that lesson, Elle reflected on how the sharing of the poems and vignettes helped to forge a relational context for the class. “I’ve gone back to that moment, the realizations that they made …I didn’t have to tell them how different peoples’ lives are and what might influence somebody’s beliefs or even moods or temperaments.”

The Danger of a Single Story/The Promise of Multiple Forms

So far, I have argued that art as story facilitated agency, opening students to themselves and each other, to their lives as narrative exploration, multiple subjectivities, and open to revision. Art as story served another important function that was to offer a
range of perspectives through multiple forms of representation and modalities. Nora described her purposes for selecting a wide range of texts in this way:

I definitely try to get a range of different kinds of texts, if for nothing else, for variety, but also like looking at the same question or the same issue from lots of different viewpoints and sort of, multiple genres allow us to do that.

Art has the rich potential to make more stories visible and available to more people. Etymologically, the word text means “a tissue, a woven fabric,” taken from the Latin, texere “to weave” (OED, [1933] 1993, p. 120). If we think of art as multiple forms of text then meaning would need to be woven in and across (as opposed to extracted from) many forms and modalities. Through such a stance we would be more apt to see connections and interrelationships between and among text. If stories are a way of knowing and understanding human phenomena, multiple forms of story can be seen as expanding what students can know and understand.

As a guiding framework for thinking about story and multiple stories, students in the tenth grade began the year by watching the TED talk by Nigerian novelist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (2009) entitled, “The Danger of a Single Story.” In this talk, Adichie describes any life and culture as composed of many overlapping stories, and the thrust of her argument is that although single stories may not be untrue, they are incomplete. Nora intentionally chose to share Adichie’s talk without a great deal of foregrounding, simply telling students: “I would like to share this because it will be important for what we read and discuss this year.” After sharing the clip, students discussed their reactions to the talk. They considered another word for the single story—stereotypes, and Nora underscored Adichie’s idea that it is not that these stories are untrue, only that they are incomplete. Nora later told me that at the time, she “actually thought
that students didn’t get that much out of it at first,” but this idea, the danger of a single story, was one that served as a strong guiding concept for the class; students referenced it frequently throughout the rest of the year as they came into contact with many stories, stereotypes, and counter-narratives. I also came to see how the piece was an important way of linking multiple forms of representation and modalities and story; that is, it set the stage for the idea that the more a vast array of stories and forms of story that are available, the more able we are to resist the single story.

One of the ways that tenth grade students initially explored single stories and multiple forms and modalities of story was by studying personal truths. ‘Art as story’ opened up a range of spaces to explore and negotiate meaning-making as partial and perspectival, and invited talk about the role of mode and form. Nora began the year with a unit on memoir which included four parts: 1) immersion in memoir texts and uncovering “personal truths”; 2) analyzing how perspective shapes reality; and 3) documenting and publishing personal truths-writing our own memoirs. During a student-led discussion of a core text, *A Long Way Gone: Memoirs of a Boy Soldier*, by Ishmael Beah, in thinking about “the danger of a single story” and the many ways that a story can be told, students became interested in the reliability of the narrator. In the following example, the students were discussing a chapter that conveys a blurred view of reality as the central character experiences the hallucinatory effects of drugs he is given while actively engaged in combat. In the dialogue that follows, students grapple with the concept of truth in memoir texts as they wonder about the reliability of Beah as a narrator:
Anik: I think he is losing his mind, becoming like, a monster because like, the drugs, they’re changing his mind. And he’s just a teenager. He’s afraid. He kills, buys the drugs that keep him powerful, and safe.
Haley: I agree with you Anik, that he is losing his mind. But, I don’t know. Remember that news article we read. We just don’t know how much of this actually happened.
Lacy: Either they kill people, or they kill you.
Ben: The boy dies though, and he felt guilty.
Vanessa: How can we know or trust what he is saying when he is on drugs?
Max: I think you just have to trust him.
Natasha: Maybe it doesn’t matter whether it’s real or hallucinating or whatever.
Max: Good comment.
Nora: But it is very important to have this critical eye, even if you don’t like this or if this is hard for you, and difficult to get through – consider his argument. Ask the critical questions, to force you to look deeper, even if the page isn’t grabbing you.
Vanessa: When you read, you want to feel comforted, but this is a memoir! He had some moments that were happy, but it was torn down by something tragic.

Students had recently been discussing the notion of personal truth in preparation for an upcoming writing assignment. Their negotiation of the conventions of memoir and its relationship to truth raised important questions about art and story by gesturing toward the idea that all representation is not truth but a version of it. When students question whether Beah is to be trusted, ‘How can we know or trust what he is saying when he is on drugs?’ Natasha offered that maybe it doesn’t matter whether the story is real or not, suggesting that the meaning in the story may not be a function of truth. Questions about not only what is told, but how it is told – within what conventions, what modality, what form of representation, etc. – helped students to read multiple texts critically, and would later help them to design and create texts more effectively and intentionally through the selection of an apt mode or form for storytelling.

Multimodal literacy theorists (Kress, 1997) have argued that multiple modes require human agents to make choices according to most apt mode and availability in any
given context. Choices about most apt mode can be most visible in young children; a five-year old for example, interested in boats, may draw a boat, make a paper boat or build a cardboard one to sit in, depending on their interest and the materials available to them. Older students tend to have less opportunities in school to make choices about modal representation. Decisions about most apt mode require access to multiple modes (or in the case of classrooms, opportunities to create in a range of modes) and secondly, opportunities to make choices about their use. For Kress (1996), the making of signs is a socially situated, transformative activity on two fronts: 1) the making of signs involves remaking in the process of creation, that is, how the signs are put together and used is considered an act of transformation of the materials; and 2) the making of signs involves the transformation of the maker, altering his/her subjectivities. In terms of the latter, an important project of this chapter, Kress (1996) says:

Changed subjectivities entail changed potentials for identity - where ‘identity’ indicates the production of a relatively stable external display, a ‘persona,’ from a particular configuration of internal resources or states, out of a given subjectivity. (p. 237)

When viewed in this way, art and story can be seen as transformative to both the text, the maker and the viewer, and at the same time can be seen as deeply constitutive of subjectivity. The choice-making and subjectivity involved resists universal claims and allow for agency.

In their exploration of art as story, students in Nora’s classroom explored the affordances of different forms of representation and modalities by collectively examining works of art (including visual art, dance) in dialogue with each other. One morning, during the memoir unit of study, Nora set up six art stations around the tenth grade
classroom to be explored in small self-selected student groups, under the guiding questions: 1) What kind of story can you create from an image?; and 2) How could a piece of art be a memoir text?

Through these questions, Molly encouraged students to view art as story. More specifically, Molly invited students to consider whether these artworks could be considered memoir texts, as a way of opening up the genre of memoir beyond the written form. Each group was provided with an artist’s statement about the piece and biographical information on the artist. The texts included a photograph (Dorothea Lange’s “Migrant Mother”); three paintings (Jacques Louis David’s “The Death of Marat,” William H. Johnson’s “Lil’ Sis” and George Looker’s “Government Bureau”); an illustration (Raymond Pettibon’s “What Makes a Man Stand”); and a dance on DVD (Martha Graham’s “Night Journey”).

Small group talk around one piece of artwork was followed by a whole group discussion. In the whole group discussion that followed, students discussed these different forms of representing story and how meaning was both enabled and constricted in each:

**Jezerey:** Art can be interpreted – words are limited.
**Nora:** Agree/disagree?
**Vanessa:** When I was little, I looked the pictures first. That forces you to be creative, we grow out of it as we get older, just like when I was little I ran all around.
Nora: Here (in each of the pieces), you get words with a caption – you don’t get the artist’s perspective. Advantage or disadvantage?
Sherry: Both. An advantage because you get to interpret and a disadvantage because you could get it wrong.
Shona: When it comes to art, you can never be wrong.
Tanesha: Yeah, but I think you can get it right though.
Shani: Yeah, sometimes you think what they thought.
Nora: Okay, so a strong message, one that you should pick up.
Stephanie: There is no right or wrong, just perspective.
Janice: You may get it right, but you never know the whole story.
Vanessa: It’s always your own interpretation, like the dance piece – I interpreted that as passion. It might have been meant to be something else.
Nora: So the positive is that it is open to interpretation but it could be a negative, to miss the mark!
Max: You might miss the point they are trying to get across.

As students discussed and debated representation and interpretation in this interaction, they put forth the idea that art is a medium open to interpretation, but they also trouble this idea. The assumption that “when it comes to art you can never be wrong” is complicated in several ways. Students acknowledge art as open to interpretation, but argue against the notion that “anything goes.” The idea that “you can get it right,” posits that it is possible for art to be able to convey an intended idea (or set of ideas) to an audience. Stephanie offers perspective as an alternative way of thinking about right and wrong that would accommodate multiple readings of art: “There is no right and wrong, just perspective.” And, Janice takes this one step further to suggest that meaning is perspectival and partial, with the notion that, “you may get it right but never know the whole story.” In response to Vanessa’s idea that art is necessarily interpretive and that an interpretation “might have been meant to be something else,” Nora suggests that there are also limitations to interpretation with the notion that interpretation permits the possibility that the interpreter could “miss the mark,” that is, that mis-readings are also possible.

Questions around interpretive license are important considerations about modal use in the
classroom. Art resists absolute truths. But Morgan and Mission (2006) argue that, “to say that there are no absolute truths is not to say that nothing is true, or that one thing cannot be truer than another, or rather, that the truth of some things matters more than the truth of others” (p. 119). Mis-reading a written text is something that is generally understood in school to possible. The students’ talk raises the question: are mis-readings in art possible?

This conversation was relevant to the project of opening up what counts as text. Here, students considered art as an act of reading, asking themselves what it means to interpret a piece of artwork, when that artwork is positioned as a story. They considered whether they could interpret visual text in the same way as written text. They also troubled how the nature of what can be known changes when the story is told through visual art and through dance. Furthermore, Nora invited students explicitly to read these pieces of art as memoir texts. This happened just prior to students being asked to select a most apt mode to tell their story – their multimodal memoir – and opened up options for ways of telling to include non-written forms. Students considered, through these art pieces, multiple ways of telling a story. “How do you best tell your story?” Nora asked, “Words? Images? Songs?” Creating the multimodal memoir, and writing about their experience, would serve as places for students to test out these ideas and questions, to experiment with forms of representation and/or modality, and to draw their attention to making conscious and deliberate considerations about “how to tell their story” most effectively to an audience in a range of ways in addition to print.
Multimodal Memoirs: Choosing Form

Aesthetic practice and experience is conducive to multimodal texts because it acknowledges many ways of knowing and relating to the world. During the memoir unit, tenth grade students engaged in a range of kinds of writing that included literacy autobiography, independent research, and a final essay on the novel, in addition to their multimodal memoir. They also read and studied a range of texts. In addition to the novel *A Long Way Gone*, students watched excerpts from the films*, clips from vice presidential speeches, and they looked at pieces of art. They read excerpts from memoirs*. Students wrote literacy autobiographies, life soundtracks, had open-note quizzes, studied vocabulary, informally responded to memoirs, created life soundtracks, held student-led discussions of *A Long Way Gone*, wrote fictional memoirs from art prompts, analyzed political speeches and social media for personal truths, analyzed tropes in life stories, and watched documentary to compare autobiography and biography, just to name a few.

Art education has long been interested in the notion that the selection of form has a profound effect upon thought. Choices about form, affect which aspects of meaning can be represented and how, and therefore the selection of a particular form of representation influences perception and meaning-making (Eisner 2002). The multimodal memoirs served as an invitation for students to both draw upon their arts interests and experiment with new ones; students were free to make choices about the

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9 Films included *Grizzly Man* and *Blood Diamond.*
10 Memoirs texts included *A Place to Stand: The Making of a Poet,* by Jimmy Santiago Baca; *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-time Indian* by Sherman Alexie; *Angela’s Ashes* by Frank McCourt; *Bad Boy* by Walter Dean Myers; and *Three Things I Know for Sure* by Dorothy Allison
most apt mode to tell their story using the conventions they had learned about memoir texts. Nora described to students that their multimodal work was “extending what it means to tell a memoir.” The work leading up to the assignment, encouraged students to consider different kinds of journeys they had been on (mental, geographical, spiritual) and to consider this not as a retelling of that journey, but as a “making sense of it.” Additionally, she told them:

“Make your idea work. Do what you love. Then it’s not work. You can do a combination of modes.”

The range and variation in the multimodal pieces included these things: photo essay, photography, song performance, essay, podcast, slideshow, spoken word, song lyrics, essay, percussion piece, and a family history book. I will analyze two examples of student memoirs that took two forms: a family history book, and a spoken word poem. These examples highlight the work of these students inside of a new genre in a new way.

**Haley’s Family History Book**

Haley was a theater major who opted to design and create her own book, a book of her family history. She designed the cover for the book, made the book, wrote six chapters, inscribed the text herself, and included photographs. Originally setting out to tell the story of how her parents met, her story led to a proliferation of stories that went back several generations to the stories of how her grandparents and great grandparents met. When it came time to share their work in class, Haley read chapter one of her book aloud. This chapter was told from two perspectives, her grandfather’s perspective and her grandmother’s perspective on the day they met, a design decision that was made by
Haley as a result of her discovery that her grandmother and grandfather had very different versions of the story of how they met! Afterward she said:

For my project, I made a book about my family history from generation to generation on my mom’s side. I took my original family history from a Jesus freak, to an atheist, to now. But then it’s more like Angela’s Ashes, how my family impacts who I am. I actually got the idea from a vignette from a book we read last year in ninth grade, The House on Mango Street.

As a writer, Haley was faced with the dilemma of how to represent “the story of how my grandparents met” and, influenced by Cisneros, decided upon the narrative technique of juxtaposing two stories to tell her story. The purpose of telling the story changed as she came to see her own life implicated in the stories of the lives she was telling and how she came to see that their story was in part, her story. I asked Haley to tell me more about her process:

Jessica: Can you describe how you went about your project?
Haley: I got like a giant book with like giant pages in it, but then I got decorate the front with things that my family liked and things that, like, would go with my history or along with my family history, so like, it kind of incorporates visual arts and like, yeah…
Jessica: And what was it like to do for you?
Haley: I really liked that project because I feel like part of the goal of that project was like getting to - it was like a journey, and the project for me was like a journey in itself, because I started out, like doing my religion, and how I feel, and how I used to be, … and it was like, okay, religion starts with family history, and then I just kinda scratched out the religion and wrote about my family history, and I learned about my family, and it made me learn about myself in the process, so like it was a really cool project.
Jessica: Had you ever done anything like that before?
Haley: Not really. Well like this school, I didn’t do any “fun” projects before I got here, little science fair projects and like essays and tri-folds.
Jessica: So it was fun, was it as hard of work as an essay?
Haley: It’s actually kind of harder work than an essay, but like, you’re doing something that you love, so like, it makes it a lot easier, but for something like the book, I wrote like, seven chapters and each chapter was like, three pages so ultimately it was, like a 21 page essay, so ultimately, it wasn’t any easier than an essay.
Jessica: You still had to organize your writing, construct it into meaningful chunks.
Haley: Yeah, like an introduction, and a conclusion. The conclusion was hard, like I kinda just did my whole family history and then like oh, this is me.
Jessica: And you’re not a visual arts major, you’re a theater major, so say a little bit about trying on something outside of your arts major. And is this something you’ve done elsewhere here?
Haley: Yeah, like even in your arts major here we do writing, so I did that a lot there, and like even in that class we learn all aspects of theater, so we do like the set and lighting and stuff and in like all my other classes, like in geometry right now, I’ve heard that we’re gonna just draw like, geometric shapes, and make this giant tree out of thousands of triangles. So, that’s incorporating visual arts. So, like no arts major is left out – we do, like, these projects, and even a lot of the time we have a choice, like you could do a visual arts project or like a media, or like sometimes they let you write a song and stuff.

Unfortunately, despite the work she had done and the striking aesthetic of the book (the careful hand inscription, the black and white photographs of her family, tipped in to the pages), Haley eventually became discouraged by the realization that she had spent hours inscribing the book without having the text edited, and I was unable to get a copy.

Sizzle’s Spoken Word Poetry

Tanesha (aka Sizzle) performed a spoken word poem for her multimodal memoir. On the day she presented, seeking a place from which to perform, she moved around the room and sought just the right performance space, rejecting certain spaces in the room that she felt were “dead, or had no spirit.” When she settled on the right place, she said, “I did spoken word, a rap, last year. I know people have memories. I thought I would spice it up. And I wanted to compare today with when I first started writing.” This is an excerpt of Tanesha’s spoken word in written form that describes her journey with writing raps:

I remember the first time
I wrote my first rap
And my mom kept it real, she said. Tanesha that’s whack
My bars are inviting
Writing is exciting enlightening
My raps are like facebook
Kuz people be liken
I don’t think about what I say
I say what I think
That explains why my rhymes are never distinct.
My bars grew up in the ozone
Swipe once said sizzle the booth is yo home
So long. Leave me alone. I’m so gone.
It was just me & my microphone. I must be special
Kuz my name is on his styrophome
Poet & sizz
I told him I was the best & now he tells me.
I used to feel down like devils. Now they dig what
I’m sayin my shows they bring shovels
I stood out from the rest
I tried I tried; not to be the best but
When you try hard you become success: I used to stress
I press D’s but I’m never depressed
I go in: I speak direct I keep a hood for
My projects. I’m so in front of next…

Tanesha’s rap tells the story of how she came to be a rapper. She describes her commitment to an energy that she feels in rhyme to “say what she thinks,” despite what others may think. And, it is a story of her commitment not to being the best, but to doing something that she loves that led her to “become success,” to be “so in front of next,” on the cutting edge. At the time I visited, she had taken to carry four different rap books around, in case she needed to write a few bars. If she found herself without one of those books nearby, she would text herself bars so she would not forget them. But additionally, her attention to the right space in the room, the energy of her audience, in addition to her words and mood, were all aspects that Tanesha referenced when she was about to perform. In other words, she paid careful attention to the form and modality of spoken word and maximized its affordances. As a performer, Tanesha had an acute awareness of her audience; she spoke often and with interest in how her work was received by others in
terms of what kind of “reaction” she got, and her awareness was evident on the day she performed. One challenge in rendering this piece here is that the genre is meant to be performed and, like any multimodal piece, it is significantly altered in its written form on the page. When I spoke to Tanesha recently about this, telling her I was trying to find a way to include her piece, perhaps in writing, she said, “No, it’s just not the same thing. It’s just a different thing.”

This was also a performance identity that was very much in the making. She worked within and against the appropriation of a street version, rap as spoken word. At school, Tanesha tended to use the two terms interchangeably (as seen above where she introduces her word as spoken word, a rap). Family members had suggested that she needed to “put more streets in it,” which included performative aspects that tended to give more of the response that she wanted (above she also refers to this as “spicing it up”). In this piece, Tanesha references the support of her mother and her friends as she tells her story of becoming successful as a rapper. After performing the poem, Tanesha also referenced a teacher’s influence:

We had a unit where we were doing poems. My teacher pulled me to the side - and told me to take it to another level. Sometimes it’s fun. But when I did it serious, it wasn’t giving me the response I wanted. But I wrote every day even if it was like two bars.

In her memoir, Tanesha adapts the format of battle rap (sometimes called battle rapping or battle rhyming), a type of rapping often compared to slam-dunk competitions in basketball. Emerging out the hip-hop scene in the late 1970s the battle rap genre involves the rapper making an argument, to either a real or imaginary opponent for why he or she is the best. In rap battles, a form of poetic jousting, these are competitions to see who has
the best verses. The genre involves telling your story, and demonstrating your uniqueness through humor, rhythm and rhyme, commentary, and storytelling. In the way that Ben Shahn famously said that ‘form is the visual shape of content,’ the rap battle genre provided Tanesha with a space to do a meta-performance. She could tell the story of her rapping through a rap. By selecting a form that matched the content, Tanesha could employ the devices that her story sought to get convey – rhyme, rhythm, humor, agency, and performance. She could both show and tell.

The multimodal memoirs serve as a telling example of the kinds of learning opportunities that Nora engaged as arts-based literacy. Her description of the assignment conveys multiple intentions behind the design. For instance, she described the purpose as having to do with using the conventions of memoir that they had been studying in a variety of other texts and artworks. Additionally, she encouraged students to do something they loved, suggesting that part of the project was also an opportunity to either do something they loved, or to find something they loved. She described to me in person, some additional considerations in her overall approach to design which speak to her intents and purposes behind the use of multiple modalities:

I think in terms of how I think about where I fit in with the vision of the school since I’m not an artist necessarily, but my position in terms of teaching, and [teaching] English in particular, is the idea of just looking at a text from all different ways, and complicating what a text is, and figuring out where you as a person, as a you know - history, sort of belong in a text, and what you can then do with it once you are a part of it. That really excites me. And, that is sort of what I can definitely grab onto in the vision. And that really closely aligns with things that I have tried to do. For example, the memoirs … the experience of telling your own story and you know, how important and powerful that can be, and also some of the complications, you know, in terms of truth and reality.
This notion of belonging in a text, and examining one’s history and relationship to a text, speaks to another layer of students’ agentive identity building, that is, how students used art as story and constructing their lives as works of art to locate themselves, “to figure out where [they were] as a person” in relation to a text. During the beginning of the year, this took shape in two ways: 1) students engaged in their lives as works of art as opportunities to explore their own histories and locations; and 2) art as story and multiple forms of texts were positioned to serve as *multiple* and *ongoing* opportunities for students to locate themselves in text in different ways, by tapping into interests, ways on knowing, histories, etc. So, whereas Haley and Tanesha’s multimodal memoirs were designed as opportunities to learn the conventions of memoir, they were, simultaneously engaged in other projects, what Eisner has called “the hidden curriculum” of schools – they were at once learning “content” and also learning ways of relating to art and text and ways of locating themselves in the texts of their lives and in school.

**Take What You Love and Turn it Into School**

“Do what you love. Then it’s not work.” This was Nora’s proposition to students as they planned their multimodal memoirs. Being able to “do what you love” in school changed the energy in the classroom, in the school. Students across both classes spoke often about love in school as indicated in the four excerpts:

**Ariana** (*10*th grade): Like the teachers want to motivate us so they give us options to take what you love and turn it into school.

**Eliza** (*10*th grade): I think that when you actually incorporate the arts into it, the learning, then it’s just like, you can do this or this and it’s not really a big deal because you’re doing something that you know and you love.
Mark (9th grade): Honestly you know they say that art affects people and like I believe that. It’s the reason I wake up at 5am every morning, is to you know do what I love.

Melinda (9th grade): I guess that doing something that you love and combining it with academics makes you want to learn even more. Versus learning in a blind way.

If Maxine Greene (1995) is right, that our obligation today still stands to “find ways of enabling the young to find their voices, to open up their spaces, to reclaim their histories in all their variety and discontinuity” (p. 120), art and story was one attempt to fulfill that obligation. By starting with what they loved. Doing what they loved did not mean that everything was lovely all the time. And, I am sure students would be quick to point out that not every opportunity was an opportunity to do what they loved. And it was no magic bullet; some students still forfeited assignments, or had trouble finding an idea to commit to. Yet, the ways students spoke of love, in terms of their interests and their passions, is more along the lines of what Dewey called, preferences and interests, the things that cause students to want to learn on their own initiative. This is different from what Greene (1995) refers to as impulses or unreflected-upon desires. This kind of love was widely considered important to students’ arts-based engagement across both classes.

The stories of students’ lives were necessarily implicated in their experiences with school and what counts as school. During their work on multimodal memoirs, Nora posed the question, “are experiences, memories, schools of literacy?” In this way, the multimodal projects served, like the unit with Pink Floyd in the ninth grade, as ways of thinking about art as text in a range of forms in everyday life. To consider what counts as ‘school’ was a project of both classes in different ways. In Elle’s class, “Is society a
school?” In Nora’s, “Are your lived experiences a kind of school?” Nora’s question invited students to think about where learning happens, and invited students to think about their lives as texts to both learn from and be constructed. While talking later in the spring, Nora told me that she loves teaching tenth grade because she can “teach inquiry into their own [students’] educations, their lives as literacy learners, as readers, as writers.” Not unlike the way that Elle positioned society as a kind of school and that both could be re-imagined and re-invented, Nora’s question served as an invitation for students to see the way that our lives, like the construct of school, are socially situated and open to (re)construction and revision.

Is this School?

Inviting students’ lives into the classroom meant that they learned to listen to each other, to become more awake and present to themselves in the world. These invitations operated upon an assumption that better understanding of ourselves enhances and extends our capacity to understand the lives of others. It meant using art and students’ lives as a starting place, not the other way around.

Students expressed tensions around a felt sense that they were getting something they needed, but frustration around the question, is this school? Ninth grader, Nicole:

Yeah, like at my other school, my first school, it was like, here’s your work, you know how to do it. And if you didn’t do it a certain way like if you took liberties and did what you wanted to do, they would take points off, like whenever you had to do a project with like art, they gave you an example and they wanted you to do the exact same way…When we go into our future, we’re not going to be afraid to say certain things and we’re not going to be afraid to be ourselves… at the same time we’ll have learned to use our major to help us and to create like better lives for ourselves.
The development of this kind of agency was also spoken alongside concerns that others may not see this as a legitimate form of school:

**Nicole:** People outside the school just don’t take us seriously. ‘It must be easy because like all you do is just sit in your classroom all day and talk about your major’… People don’t think that we’re getting an education.

Others, like this ninth grade student argued that it’s “still school”:

**Justin:** It’s not easy. It’s just more creative and open. But it’s just like regular school. You still have work, you have to get good grades or you don’t pass, it’s not just like draw a picture and you get through high school!

These questions around what kind of school this is, although not directly, pushed against and questioned whether the construction of life as an artistic enterprise counts as school learning. Nora described her decisions around the kinds of opportunities she wanted to provide, especially around choosing a wide range of texts and whether what she was doing was rigorous enough:

I have this dilemma about what I’m teaching: Is it academic enough, rigorous enough, college prep enough? Perhaps even more than other disciplines there is a very narrow and clear vision of what English class should be. Even if people didn’t like that, it’s still the standard by which we compare any other image of an English classroom. So, how students interpret what English class is supposed to be – kids’ ideas about what they’re supposed to be doing, in my head there is some conflict there. Last year, students would ask why we weren’t reading more canonical authors. That’s when I started to think about this class and for this school year, being really clear about what it is about, especially if it is classified as a World Literature class. That question for me, as a teacher, raises huge questions about whose voices we are consulting. That was something that was important for me this year to set up. If students leave thinking more about their place in the world and their relationship to other people and ideas about character, and respect of other people, then *that* I would be really proud of.

**Conclusion**

In this chapter I frame a way of thinking about how arts-based pedagogy was designed and enacted in Elle and Nora’s English classes at the beginning of the school
year within a framework of art as story and with students’ lives as works of art. Although
the teachers, Nora and Elle did not articulate a vision for classification under the rubric of
art as story, since our work together was a collaborative effort, a more accurate picture
would include the ways we co-constructed this idea together. My decision to describe
arts-based literacy in terms of art as story and lives as works of art, came from my work
with teachers, with students, and from my attempt to pull together and find ways of
talking about this work.

Students’ constructions of their lives as works of art required that they step out
and look inward. This work enabled them to go deep into their lives and to consider their
own representation in ways that are often inaccessible when we are immersed in our
lives. For Alyssa, her fury became apparent. For Erin, she saw a mirror of who she was.
To Haley, she saw her life in the lives of her extended family. Through art, students
explored their lives and created stories to understand their pasts, to place themselves in
the present, and to imagine their futures. They changed their names, projected whom
they wanted to be, became archaeologists of their lives, probed their own stories and
listened to and studied the stories of others. I argue that the construction of their lives as
works of art provided opportunities for students to apply ways of thinking often
associated with art to their own lives. In other words, while schools and society tend to
operate upon fixed notions of the self, through art as story, students cultivated an anti-
deterministic stance, saw their lives as sites of inquiry and open to revision, and
developed an awareness of multiple subjectivities. They were more able to see their lives
as in the making and as open to their own creation.
Likewise, these arts-based practices that encouraged students to see images of themselves as complex, contradictory, and at the same time whole, served as a necessary step in viewing others in similar ways that resist oversimplification and essentialization. Their work was taken up through acts of communication that illuminated a shared world, enabling students to see the self as never wholly autonomous, but constructed in relation to others. By positioning their lives as important texts to be in conversation with other texts, they had opportunities to locate themselves in their work in the English classroom as agents. All of this work seemed to position them to be more agentive, and to resist constructions of the self and others as fixed, predetermined and unmalleable. The way they viewed their own lives and the lives of others changed because of art. They saw the potential to alter, revise, change and acted upon those changes. They saw multiple subjectivities and contradiction as human complexity, not as a deficit.

While students constructed their lives as works of art, they also encountered a range of texts through various forms of representation and modalities. As Greene (1995) has pointed out, “painting, literature, theater, film – all open doors and move persons to transform. We want to enable all sorts of young people to realize that they have the right to find works of art meaningful against their own lived lives” (p. 150). Having the “right to find works of art meaningful” meant (re)positioning art as story which expanded what counts as text in the English classroom to include a range of modalities and forms of representation. This expansion offered more ways of finding meaningful works and more ways of creating and interpreting story through more forms. Art as story provided opportunities for students to make choices about form and content, and to make selections according to most apt mode. Through vignettes, poems, handmade books, and
spoken word - through music, literature, video, popular media etc., students came to see art and text in new ways. Most importantly, they began to recognize the wide range of texts available to them and the interconnectivity of the texts in their lives and the texts they encountered in school. Arts-based practice helped students to develop agentive identities and to locate themselves in the project of school.

Taken together, art as story and constructing their lives as works of art, also served to expand the possibilities available to students to take up new ways of thinking about school. Set against the backdrop of a highly standardized school climate, starting with the arts in adolescents’ lives, was an alternative to transmission models and deficit perspectives of schooling, and one that students frequently spoke about, albeit in various ways. As Vanessa described: “in others schools they focus more on the academics, but here, we focus on the academics too, but they make it more about the student than what they are putting into their heads.” Instead, these practices that centered around stories, encouraged inquiry (into their lives and an awareness of those around them), promoted the idea that school would be about specificity not standardization, and that students’ lives and ideas would weigh as an important and central component of the curriculum.

An aesthetic view of literacy challenged technical ways of understanding literacy in school. Art and story, through a wide range of forms and modalities, helped students to locate themselves in their work, through their hearts and minds, and in relation to one another, in the social context of the classroom. It positioned them as agentive meaning makers and designers of their lived worlds. Wide-awake and critical engagement in the world is predicated on self-awareness. In this way, starting with art and story and the self as an artful construction set the stage for students to engage and extend world reading. In
the next chapter, I look at how this work was extended into world reading through the notion of art as a theoretical instrument.
Chapter V

Inquiry by Design:
Art as a Theoretical Instrument

Introduction

This chapter explores what it means to conceive of a curriculum where youth are invited, through art, to draw upon their human capacity, need, and desire to theorize the world around them. Picking up where chapter four left off, in this chapter I aim to show how the grounding work with art and story and with students’ lives as works of art was extended, in the middle part of the year, to include art as a theoretical instrument (Horton & Freire, 1990) for understanding the world. These dimensions were not discrete; students did not abandon thinking of their lives as works of art, but I do want to highlight a shift that happened that served to extend that grounding work into “world reading” (Freire, 1987) as part of a “spiraling curriculum” (Bruner, 1960). I look in particular to how Nora and Elle and their students designed and enacted opportunities to use art to inquire into the world around them.
The Art of World Reading: Adolescents, Critical Literacy, and the Aesthetic

Although all human beings have the capacity and desire to make sense of the world around them, there is a way in which theorizing is particularly relevant to adolescents and their development. Adolescents are drawn to questions of why and what if? Curious about the world around them and where they place themselves in it, they test, resist and wonder. Developmental psychologists often refer to adolescence as a time of theoretical thinking, a time when thoughts, “rooted in assumptions about the way things work… are often tested through real-world trial–and-error experimentation.” (Nakkula & Toshalis, 2006, p. 2). As a stage of experimentation and testing, adolescence is tied to the imagination; adolescents engage in thinking that is future-oriented as they negotiate their pathways to adulthood and imagine their futures in and outside of school. Drawing from this framework, and against the grain of more dominant ways of looking at adolescents and their work and needs for the future in terms of tools, I look to how students in Nora and Elle’s classes used art to foster inquiry into the world. I examine how art as a theoretical instrument provided opportunities to cultivate opening and widening of perspectives of their lived worlds, to cultivate uncertainty, and to engage the imagination.

Paulo Freire (1987) famously said that all human beings engage in world reading, making sense of and reading their worlds prior to the introduction to print; he argued that word and world reading are recursive and mutually dependent. Making this link explicit, Freire (in Horton & Freire, 1990) described a relationship between literature and world reading this way:
For me the reading of books is important to the extent that books give me a certain “theoretical instrument,” a relationship with which I can make the reality more clear vis-à-vis myself… This is the relationship that I try to establish between reading words and reading the world (p. 31).

Reading reality, he goes on to emphasize, requires a certain degree of theoretical understanding which can be practiced through reading literature; in other words, text can help us to better understand context. Taking this as a guiding frame, I look in this chapter to how the practices at Tobin expanded Freire’s framework to include a wide range of texts in addition to literature. That is, I look to how art was used as a theoretical instrument. I look to how interaction with art, both viewing and creating it, helped to situate students and their experience within the context of their immediate world and a wider world, and created opportunities for world reading. Since world reading is necessarily multimodal and multi-sensory, I aim to show how art as a theoretical instrument expanded the epistemologies in the classroom: how things came to be known expanded the range and depth of what could be known.

At first glance, art as a theoretical instrument may seem to contradict my earlier argument in chapter two, where I described this study as an alternative to research interested in the instrumental effects of art. What makes art as a theoretical instrument a different argument is the nature of the instrumentation. Whereas instrumental studies have tended to look at the role of art in improving measurable skills, the goal of a theoretical instrument is to build and enhance a practice – of theorizing and making sense of what it means to be in the world. The notion of a theoretical instrument places the student at the center and serves as an alternative to banking models of learning; according
to Freire, world sense-making is a practice of freedom, a practice that assumes the creative power of the learner to make meaning.

One morning, Elle asked her ninth grade students directly to respond to the question: “Is the world a text?” followed by a quotation from Paolo Freire: “Reading the world always precedes reading the word, and reading the word implies continually reading the world.” Although the notion of reading the world was central to the work that students did across both classes, on this day the idea was explicitly foregrounded as students were invited to think about an expanded definition of literacy and text, and the relationship between words and worlds. Although students had been reading their worlds and their lives from the first day of school, the concept of world reading was somewhat unfamiliar and understandably abstract to students and it encouraged them to think about text in new ways. In the following examples, students describe their thoughts on whether or not the world could be a text. I will share four examples and then analyze afterward how their comments serve as a way of thinking about world reading at Tobin.

Responding to the question “Is the world a text?”:

**Isabelle:** I think so. I’m not sure. But I think the world is a text. A statement of feeling or words of an author. A text is anything you can derive meaning from. Everyone is looking for meaning. So, I think the world has meaning and everyone inside the world makes up a small piece of the meaning. But, there are some people who go above and beyond to make meaning of the world and make sense of it all.

**Justin:** The world is a text because texts are told in different ways from different perspectives. The world is viewed by all people in their own way.

**Seneca:** The world is a text. There are many reasons to this, but the main reason is because nothing is really true. All is written and all believe that which is ‘law.’

**Lys:** A text contains a message, anything you can derive meaning from. The world is a text. You can read the world by interpreting it. It is more important to read the world before you read the word because words by certain people aren’t right. We need to know what we’re getting into before we’re stuck in it.
Isabelle’s response suggests that the impulse to make meaning of our lives is a human impulse, “everyone is looking for meaning,” and also speaks to the idea that it might be possible to “go above and beyond,” to make meaning of the world and to “understand it better” (emphasis added). Comments like Isabelle’s speak to students’ desire for and expression of the impulse to “pierce the cotton wool” of daily life (Woolf, 1976), to see beyond “the crust of conventionality” (Dewey, 1954, p. 183). On another occasion, Isabelle added, “I don’t like not to know things.” Liking to know things, to the extent that this can be interpreted as students’ desires to make sense of and understand what is going on around them, can be likened to world reading. Justin considered the nature of reading worlds as necessarily perspectival, noting that how a person reads the world would depend upon that person’s lived experience. Justin’s notion of multiple texts and multiple perspectives describes an approach to world reading that was fundamental to each of the classes I observed. Taking this for granted, Seneca and Lys interrogate the relationship between text and truth and thereby suggest the need to read words and worlds critically. Seneca, questioning truth, speaks to the precarious relationship between truth and written text. Arguing the idea that it is important to read the world because sometimes words “aren’t right,” Lys gestures toward the idea that text, as a human construction, is never neutral. Bringing an ethical concern to the fore, her argument targets some words as unjust and suggests that “needing to know” is a form of literacy for justice. She takes this a step further to outline a danger in not knowing, and the potential for “getting stuck.” The notion of world reading, she argues effectively, is very much about a literacy practice that stems from a need to know, in order to determine what is right and act upon it. Although students rarely talked about world reading in such
explicit ways, this conversation is important to include because it suggests the ways that world reading was engaged as a human capacity, as necessarily multiperspectival, and in the service of social justice. These three ways of thinking about world reading, teased out from the students’ comments, exemplify a way of thinking about how world reading was situated as critical literacy across Nora and Elle’s classes.

World reading is of particular interest across both of these classes because of the integral role played by art. World reading is facilitated by art because both require perception. Speaking to the importance of learning to perceive, and the potential role that art might play in this process, Dewey (1934) argues that most of our seeing is aborted by our tendency to attach labels to what we already know before we have explored what there is to see. “Recognition,” he said, “is perception arrested” (1934, p. 52). For Dewey, learning to perceive means breaking through “the inertia of habit” (1934, p. 72).

Making sense of immediate and wider worlds is what the Buddhist traditions refer to as becoming “awake” to the world. Art can assist in world reading or becoming more wide-awake by providing “shocks of awareness” (Greene, 1995), opportunities to perceive the world in new and unexpected ways. Each of these ways of thinking about world reading is predicated on the notion that the arts offer embodied experiences that help us to perceive more fully and in new ways. Phenomenological philosopher Merleau-Ponty (1967) foregrounds the foundational role of perception in understanding and engaging with the world. An aesthetic view of perception, as Merleau-Ponty imagines it, considers the body as an organizing core of experience. Offering the mind/body subject as an alternative to Cartesian ‘cogito,’ he describes perception as reliant on mutual engagement of the consciousness and the body. It is has long been assumed in the field of art that
perception is affected by both, but this is less taken-for-granted in the field of literacy. This occurs even in critical literacy, which seems to lend itself to an aesthetic component. After all, if critical literacy has to do with world reading and world reading is necessarily multisensory and multimodal, one might suspect that an aesthetic framework would be not only helpful, but necessary. As Morgan and Mission (2006) argue however, aesthetic experience has often been overlooked, or at times implicit when critical literacy/world reading is considered “a discourse of objectivity and reason” (p.133). Although critical feminists have long recognized the role of the aesthetic in sense-making (hooks, 1994; Rich, 1993, 2001; Lorde, 1984; Anzaldúa, 1987), schools have more often taken up the discourse of objectivity and reason. Undergirding my exploration of art as a theoretical instrument across both of these classes, is the question: what role does the aesthetic play in world reading?

**Art, New Ways of Looking, and the Social Imagination**

Learning to look and to perceive has long been associated with the arts. Learning to look is central to creative processes whose innovation depends upon seeing things in new ways. It is standard that students learn in studio classes how to observe in order to perceive better. Museums publish wonderful books for children about learning to look differently, to observe, to see things with fresh eyes. Through the process of learning critique, art students learn how to look at their own work anew, as well as the work of others, and are encouraged through the process of critique to voice and share a range of ways of looking at a piece of art. Seneca spoke to the ways that meaning-making is enhanced by art because it affords many ways of looking:
Seneca: Well, if you have, like, let’s say you have one topic, you hear a song on it, you see a piece of artwork on it, and maybe you see like someone acting it out. You can get so many different interpretations from each of them. The song, it usually repeats things... A piece of artwork it can be read many different ways – there’s like one big meaning that the artist wants you to get… After coming to all of these different conclusions… that art piece and that song, they’re gonna start to connect, even if it’s just a little bit, and then, when you see people acting it out…. It helps you find like meaning…. You have to kind of look at the bigger picture to see the meaning, and it helps with art because there are so many different ways you can look.

Awakening to new ways of seeing the world through opening up a range of perspectives, was cultivated in Nora and Elle’s classrooms through both *multiple texts* and also through the provision of *a range of ways of looking* at and thinking about those texts. It was facilitated by both the curriculum and the pedagogy.

One way that both Nora and Elle invited multiple ways of looking was by teaching and studying literary theory as lenses. This work connects to a belief that perception is epistemic; we look from different frames of reference that influence what we see. Eisner (2002) describes the curriculum as “as a mind-altering device” (p. 9) in the way that it provides frames for learning, and suggests that frames of looking are often a “hidden curriculum,” since these frames are usually tacit. Since frames can both limit and expand what can be known, this choice is based upon a belief that expanding frames of reference is an important project of school, in both extending what can be known and understood and in cultivating awareness of self in relation to others, their lived experience and worldview. Nora and Elle had both read Deborah Appleman’s (1993) text: *Looking Through Critical Lenses: Teaching Literary Theory to Secondary Students* and adapted Appleman’s work to encourage students to practice a range of ways of looking at multimodal texts.
The student work I am going to share comes from tenth graders who studied formalist, Marxist, reader response, and feminist lenses in the context of a unit called, “Voice.” The unit was anchored by the core text, *A Thousand Splendid Suns* by Khaled Hosseini. Students were introduced to the four lenses and to a range of texts on Afghanistan, and then provided opportunities to read and respond to the text using a lens of their choice. Of all the literary lenses, the feminist lens was taken up most widely by students. Focusing on the tumultuous lives of two Afghan women whose paths cross over the course of forty years, the novel lends itself to a feminist read to make sense of the horror and motives behind the domestic abuse in the novel. When given the choice among the four lenses, seventeen of twenty-five students, for example, opted to write a final essay reading through the feminist lens. In this World Literature class, Hosseini’s book was selected, in part, as a text for students to learn something about Afghanistan, to complicate their ‘single stories,’ to serve in part as one window for students\(^\text{11}\) to widen their frame of reference. A wordle that Nora created from students’ initial ideas about Afghanistan included: bombs, war, terrorism and Alladin as the most frequent associations, and one of her goals for the unit overall was to widen students’ frames of reference. In the student work that follows, I will share how students engaged in literature and the visual arts, and in each one differently, as theoretical instruments to make sense of the characters in *A Thousand Splendid Suns*. In the segment of a student-led discussion below, Lacy, the student discussant, poses her question to the class. The question, which begins as a question specific to the characters shifts, throughout the talk, to social critique and students eventually theorize the social construction of gender.

\(^\text{11}\) Molly used Emily Style’s (1996) notion of windows and mirrors to frame this world literature class.
Throughout the talk, students inquire into and theorize gender socialization and where agency comes from:

**Lacy:** Who is more honorable: Mariam for avoiding unnecessary conflict or Laila for standing up to Rasheed?

**Christopher:** Laila. It takes a lot of courage.

**Stephanie:** Laila. She is more honorable, she’s protecting herself. Mariam also somewhat honorable, protecting the child.

**Tanesha:** Younger, Mariam took everything, howled at Mariam and told her she taught Laila how to be disrespectful. Mariam had a reason. I would do what Laila did.

**Travis:** Laila, like Chris said, it takes guts. He could take her out. It’s not really honor, it’s just how they were raised, like how Mariam was treated, put down, put pebbles in her mouth, but Laila, he treated her like a queen sort of, at least at the beginning.

**Sherry:** I agree. It depends on how you were raised. I think they’re both honorable in their own way.

**Shona:** Also the generation. We stick up more for ourselves. Laila was also raised better.

**Lacy:** Because even though she had the heart to stand up to him, she stole and tried to drag Mariam with her. Laila changed her because they were fighting back.

**Anik:** Sometimes it takes someone to risk in order to change. She didn’t have a problem standing up for herself or Mariam, ‘cause he’s kinda dangerous… abusive.

**Sasha:** Miriam is old. She knows what to do and when. Laila, she’s new, and has more guts.

**Ariana:** It depends who they are. Mariam knows Rasheed better. Laila does preserve honor. She’s treated badly but still, stood up for Miriam – that could have affected her.

**Stephanie:** Going back to what Shona and Sasha were saying, Mariam had no education and didn’t know how to stand up for herself. Laila had a teacher.

**Janice:** An example is she didn’t let Rasheed beat up Miriam. Miriam was shocked. She gave Rasheed a piece of mind, took it as a threat, so I think Laila is more honorable.

**Nora:** Do you see a connection between education and self-worth?

**Stephanie:** Her teacher even told her that directly. That influenced her and made her more capable.

**Sasha:** Laila is around more people, so she knows how to stick up for herself.

**Anik:** It’s different when you’re educated. Laila was educated. She knows how to communicate, use her words. Mariam, who has been sheltered from things, doesn’t know how to handle things and deal with people.

**Shona:** It’s not really education, but she’s been around other kids, in school, and around other kids, teachers.
Nora: So, our outside influences make us who we are. Who our teachers are. What we learn, content. Who we’re around, interact with, and talk to influence on our lives.

As students enter the lived world of the text, they negotiate an ethical dilemma around the two central female characters, and posit theories for their actions. While several students argue that Laila has more courage, honor, and guts, Travis shifts the conversation from the personal to the social by offering the idea that “it’s not really honor, it’s just how they were raised.” When Shona adds, “also the generation, we stick up for ourselves,” she shifts the conversation from Laila and Mariam and how they were raised, to include her own generation, including herself and potentially others of her generation in the “we.” Stephanie connects the actions of the characters to education which is then extended upon even further by Shona who urges students to consider that it may be more than education, but a larger social context; “it not really education, but she’s been around other kids, in school, and around other kids, teachers.”

As the evolution of this conversation suggests, by the time students had studied this text – in February - they were well accustomed to the practice of engaging with art and literature as theorizing. In this exchange, students wonder, question and posit theories about what makes a person honorable, and where action and agency come from. Through art and talk, they come to new and emergent understandings about the role of social context and what counts as education.

There were a number of activities that were designed to position art as a theoretical instrument and to position students as inquirers and theorizers. Alongside the work with lenses, and before engaging in the visual art, students explored character through talk, media, and art: they cast the characters in the book as if it were to be a
movie, created and presented body biographies for each of the characters, and read a piece called “The Hijab: A Life Revealed.” After studying the formal attributes of characterizaton, students were asked to construct a creative piece from the perspective of a character of their choice and to create it “as if it were created by the character him/herself.” Alongside the creative piece, they were asked to turn in a graphic organizer outlining their rationale and describing the traits they sought to convey in their choice of mode or form. A number of students opted to render visually either Laila or Mariam. The interwoven relationship of the two women is mirrored by the design of the book; the first third of the book focuses on Mariam, the second and fourth on Laila, and the third switching between Mariam and Laila. In group talk over the course of several days, students had discussed at length Mariam and Laila’s complex and evolving inter-relationship in the novel. Below, I share four arts pieces that depict the characters of these two women. I will describe each image individually, and at the end, comment on the collection of the four images as a group:

Avery’s Laila

Avery’s black and white graphic representation of Laila juxtaposes two capacities that are often set in opposition to each other - a clenched fist and a heart - to symbolize Laila’s bravery and love. The fist is slightly overlaid by the heart but above it, suggesting some degree of balanced tension between the two capacities. She
gave both images an active dimension by including what seem to be moving lines emanating from above and below them. Next to the images, written in palindrome, so as to be slightly cryptic, is the word strength. A clever feat of eye trickery, it can be read frontwards and backwards as well as upside down, perhaps suggesting this capacity as a given from any perspective. As the only word, and set in between both images, it seems to connect them, although, since it is slightly cryptic, the eye is drawn to make sense of this word that connects the two images. In her graphic organizer, Avery referenced Laila’s strength in standing up to Rasheed on Mariam’s behalf, and her strength in ultimately having to leave Mariam, someone she has come to love, for the hope for a better life. This is Avery, as Laila, fighting for what she knows and thinks to be a right course of action – protecting Mariam, facing Rasheed, and ultimately choosing to leave.

**Aurora’s Mariam**

Aurora’s image of a woman’s face behind the burka, peering out from behind partially concealed bars, was designed from Mariam’s point of view, to convey Miriam’s sense of feeling “totally controlled by outside forces.” Students had discussed Mariam’s psychological imprisonment in the novel; they were troubled by her relationship with her abusive husband, and questioned the roots of her lack of agency with Rasheed. They wondered why she didn’t leave. In her rationale, Acacia references Mariam’s orders from her husband to remain concealed and references the curiosity Mariam expresses in the novel about other women whom she sees on the street wearing open-toed shoes,
skirts, short sleeves, and no head coverings as influences on the drawing. Aurora’s pencil drawing, with careful rendering of the eyes beneath the bars, conveys a haunting image. The psychic imprisonment with the bars seems further conveyed in the empty gaze of the eyes. This is Aurora, as Mariam, trapped by the orders of a dominating and abusive husband and without a course of action.

**Ariana’s Mariam**

Ariana chose to construct Mariam’s identity quite differently. Taking an imaginative leap, Ariana depicted Mariam as we never saw her in the novel, as youthful, wide-eyed, and peering up from her headscarf. Her face is visible and her body’s form is visible in her clothes. Many students in the class found Mariam to be the least agentive female character in the book, and for this reason they found her perhaps the most difficult to relate to.

Here, Ariana renders Mariam in modern form, the style of the drawing taking inspiration from manga (Japanese cartoons). By rendering Mariam in manga, a style Ariana liked to follow and experiment with, she familiarized and found a way to identify with a character who might otherwise have seemed furthest away and most difficult to understand. She chose the motif of flowers to represent different aspects of Mariam, something growing, blooming, and organic to represent a character that was in many ways deadened by the loss in her life; Ariana chose daffodils for Mariam’s misfortune, eremurus for her endurance, and purple hyacinths for her sorrow. The figure holds bulbs and seven wilted
flowers over her stomach to represent her miscarriages and “the life that Miriam could not bring into the world.” Ariana’s rendering of Mariam is an imaginative and ultimately empathic act of representation. She wrote: “I drew Mariam as a young, beautiful woman because in my mind that’s how I imagine her. I imagine her smiling. Her hair is dark, loosely peeking out of her hijab.” This is Ariana as Mariam, a young woman before the Mariam we meet in the novel.

Meika’s Laila

Meika chose to represent Laila through a self-portrait in photograph. Her photograph, a close-up of Laila’s face, focuses, like Aurora’s, on the eyes, but her intentions are different though no less expressive. Meika described her photograph this way:

I chose Laila. I took a picture of myself in the veil because the veil is really important in A Thousand Splendid Suns. Mariam and Laila had to be covered up, so obviously that was important to include. The eyes, well, they are expressive. There’s expression in them because that’s all you can see. So, I decided to include just from the head up, because the rest would be concealed. In one of the pictures, my eyes looked a bit reflective, kind of like a mirror in the eyes. I saw it as kind of a parallel between Laila and Miriam.

Meika’s image of Laila plays with value as an affordance of the form of photography. Although the image is in color, the light is the most visible feature, literally lighting up Laila’s face under the hijab. The reference to Laila and Mariam being parallel is a motif that recurs throughout A Thousand Splendid Suns, particularly in the end of the novel.
where the relationship deepens between the two women, across their observable
differences. The reflection in the eyes, through a visual medium, offers another way of
thinking about and conceptualizing this relationship of Laila and Mariam’s
interdependency. That the character is veiled and all that we see are the eyes, is a
powerful way of rendering Laila – and Mariam – as connected by their gaze. Light in the
eye also carries associations with lightness of heart: “The lamp of the body is the eye: if
therefore thine eye be single, thy whole body shall be full of light” (Matthew 6:22,23).
Meika depicts Laila, despite her oppressive circumstances, as full of light, a light that is
mirrored in the light of another woman.

The four visual representations, taken together, show how art was used as a
theoretical instrument to engage the students’ social imaginations. In deciding how to
represent each character, students found ways to deal with gaps and ambiguities
imaginatively as they made decisions about how to render the character visually.
Questions drove the imaginative depictions: “Why is Mariam this way?” And “What if
she were a young girl?” “Why” and “what if” are the imagination’s questions, the
questions that guide our exploration of human characters and events. As these young
women became and spoke for Laila and Mariam, they entered the minds and lives of
these characters and imagined what it would be like to live otherwise. In each image, we
get different perspectives on students’ insight into character through a feminist lens.
Each depiction allows us to “see” the characters in different ways. For instance, Avery’s
depiction takes a stylized approach to convey two characteristics that she felt were
important and in tension with one another. Aurora’s rendering of Mariam as entrapped
within an underarmor of bars, stands in striking juxtaposition with Alexis’s drawing of
her as a young girl holding flowers. Whereas Avery depicted Laila with a fist and a heart, Meika chose to focus on the light in her eyes.

What is most remarkable about the four depictions, is how each one is highly justifiable and supported by the text, and how each one offers the viewer a way of thinking about Laila and Mariam that is, in its own way, new. By definition, art seeks diversity of representation. In visual form, all of these images provide a range of ways of looking at Laila and Mariam that add texture, complexity, and depth to them as characters. As a text set, they show how multiperspectival and divergent representations emerged through inquiry and theorizing that stemmed from art. In their depictions the girls develop their empathic capacity and ideas about their own possibilities for the future, both critical to building awareness of their own lives and awareness of the lives of other women.

**Art for Rethinking: Expanding the Existential Repertoire**

The year I spent at Tobin was the year that Arizona enacted stringent policy on immigration that included new laws making the failure to carry immigration documents a crime, and giving police broad power to detain anyone suspected of being in the country illegally. From the standpoint of the teacher, world reading can take on particular and often unexpected challenges with topics that are highly charged. One dominant response to highly charged topics such as these, is to avoid them altogether in school. In the design of a unit on immigration called “Homeland,” Nora instead sought to offer a range of ways of thinking about immigration to broaden what had become a polarizing discourse in national news. As part of a design that sought to resist a single story of the immigrant experience, students read a range of texts through the lenses of language,
culture, and identity, in order to address an overarching question: How are new immigrants to America changed by living here, and how is America changed by them? The range of texts included essays, news articles, visual art, media messages, and film.

In reading each of the texts, Nora emphasized two goals for students - looking for what makes the immigrant experience unique, and also at what they have in common.

To begin the unit, students read a poem in two languages called “What Gets Lost/Que Se Pierde,” by Alastair Reid. Nora had selected the poem as a way of beginning a unit on immigration for two reasons: because it addresses difference through language, and in particular, the challenges in mediating between two languages; and, because it is also about communicating in general. It is about the idea that language is both open to misinterpretation and partial to experience:

**What Gets Lost/Lo Que Se Pierde**
I keep translating *traduzco continuamente* entre palabras words que no son las mías into other words which are mine *di palabras a mis palabras* Y finalmente de quien es el texto? Who do words belong to? *Del escritor o del traductor* writer, translator *O de los idiomas* or to language itself? *Traductores, somos fantasmas que viven entre aquel mundo y el nuestro* Translators are ghosts who live In a limbo between two worlds *pero poco a poco me ocurre que el problema no es cuestión de lo que se pierde en traduccion* the problem is not a question of what gets lost in translation *sino* but rather *lo que se pierde* what gets lost

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12 Among the texts were: “Fields of Tears” (The Economist, December 2010); “Bowling with Our Own” (research on immigration by John Leo); *In America*, (a film about an immigrant family); “Only Daughter” (a short story by Sandra Cisneros); “When Your Tongue is no Longer Your Tongue,” (from Lehrer and Sloan, *Crossing the BLVD*); Orientation Day (an essay from *Facing History and Ourselves*); and “Cajes de Carton” (a short story by Francisco Jimenez).
entre la occurencia – sea amor o de agonia
between happiness or love or pain
Y el hecho de que llega
a existir en palabras
and their coming into words
Para nostostros todos, amantes, habladores
For lovers or users of words
el problema es este this is the difficulty –
lo que se pierde
what gets lost
no es lo que se pierde en traducion sino
is not what gets lost in language itself lo que se pierde
en el hecho en la lengua,
en la palabra misma.

The poem was read aloud in class by two students, Vanessa who volunteered to read the sections in Spanish, and Max, who volunteered to read the sections in English. The alternation between the two languages in the poem happens unexpectedly, often in the middle of a line, creating a violation of expectations that intensified the performance. The reading of it by two students gave the issue of language human character and created a lived through, aesthetic experience that stood out to Nora as an important text for the unit. Eisner (2002) explained, “the arts are a means of exploring our own interior landscape. When the arts genuinely move us, we discover what it is we are capable of experiencing” (p. 11). Reflecting on the performance and discussion, Nora said:

That alone was kind of an interesting exercise for the students to hear. Just to sort of see the transition, and see the wealth of knowledge in the room.
The other thing that I think it did was widen the issue and take it away from the political tensions that surround it, because I think it is a difficult topic sometimes for students even to approach. Even if they don’t have a strong opinion, or know their position, they know that people around them do. It is definitely in society a vitriolic issue for a lot of people, but I think that it allowed us to talk about it in a much more universal, human experience, way.

I think the theme that they got from the poem was that sometimes language itself doesn’t communicate what we experience, you know, that there are limits in language - any language, in and of itself. And so, when we take that to think
about someone who is managing two languages and two parts of their identity, how much more of a struggle that might be. So, I think that it sort of allowed everybody a way in, to talking about the limitations of language, and the struggles with language, and how it cannot always communicate what you are experiencing. Because it wasn’t even about immigration, it was very much, in a roundabout way, getting at a similar issue.

The poem, as an aesthetic text, expanded the scope of students’ lived experiences, and in some ways, broke the inertia of habitual ways of looking at immigration and at language. Vanessa had come to the United States from Guatemala. Max was born in the United States, of European descent. The idea of “allowing everyone a way in,” served to set the stage for a unit on immigration that sought a range of art and modalities as text to interrupt divisive and dualistic ways of thinking about immigration, as being either for it, or against it. 13

Later in the year, Nora spoke to me of this poem again, and the way it encouraged students to think about the value and affordances of art to offer a range of ways of world reading, to consider that different forms of communicating allow us to know different things. Students explored the idea that when it comes to language, it is not only what gets lost in translation, but what gets lost in language itself. The poem invited students to consider how, whether we speak the same language or not, whether we are adolescents and parents, partners, two colleagues, friends or enemies, we all, as “users of words,” at times, dream of having a common language. In this way the poem broadened the issue of

13 To open the topic of immigration, students were asked to select political cartoons that depicted the issue, and this one, selected by Natasha was an example of the kind of single story that students recognized in the media.
language so that students could see understanding as shared human struggle rather than something singular to speakers of languages other than English. Nora added:

They talked about art and how visual literacies, being able to capture something that writing could not and that words cannot, and …this conversation about how really powerful emotions and experiences are, it just doesn’t do them justice to say them. But, I think in the context of literature and poetry being art, which I definitely consider them to be, then it’s sort of creating a similar experience as what they were talking about.

Nora’s words speak to the way in which the aesthetic experience of reading the poem and listening to voices of their peers perform it, extended what students could know and understand about language and difference. Through the medium of the poem as an embodied aesthetic text, it both extended what they saw as their repertoire for world reading and making sense of experience, and helped them to see one of the most frequent associations with immigration - language difference, as not isolated but situated within a shared experience, and at times struggle, of living and communicating with one another.

**Cultivating Uncertainty: Embodied Perception**

Sometimes, the embodied nature of looking at art cultivated uncertainties that served as gateways to theorizing. Inquiry both stems from and generates questions (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993). When students cultivated uncertainties, they cultivated dispositions toward curiosity and inquiry; they theorized and generated knowledge that stemmed from what they wanted and needed to know. As part of the array of texts in the immigration unit, students studied in small groups a collection of visual art by Arizona-based artists entitled: “SB1070 – An Artist’s Point of View” ([http://www.cnn.com/2010/LIVING/08/06/Arizona.immigration.art/index.html](http://www.cnn.com/2010/LIVING/08/06/Arizona.immigration.art/index.html)). The nine pieces, part of a traveling exhibit, reflect the artists’ perspectives on the Arizona law SB1070, are
rendered in a range of media including paint, linocut, mixed media collage, photography and printmaking. When students worked in small groups, I tended to participate as a group member. On this day, I worked with Tanesha to study a piece called “Arizona 2010” by Gennaro Garcia, a linocut print that depicts a blindfolded Latina woman wrapped in the American flag. Nora’s guiding questions for the groups were: How do you read the image?; What do you think the artist is trying to say about immigration?; What is the mood?; How is it achieved?; How is reading an image different from reading a written text? The transcript that follows is taken from our conversation, and serves as an example of how the arts can provide a realm to encounter charged topics in an embodied way (Roberts, 2005). Although embodied experience sometimes lacks a lexicon for describing it, I attempt to show the kinds of thinking and feeling that it engendered:

**Jessica:** What stands out to you?

**Tanesha:** I like it. I really like that she looks proud. You know, like her head is held high, and her arms are out and she looks proud, like she’s not gonna be put down.

**Jessica:** You’re right. I noticed that too. And she’s blindfolded. I’m not sure what to make of that. But it’s sort of eerie, isn’t it?

**Tanesha:** I think it just covers who she is, like you can’t really identify her. She could be anyone.

**Jessica:** Yes, I suppose she could. The red stands out to me too. It makes it feel powerful, like a combination of love (I see she has heart around her neck there) and maybe rage too.

**Tanesha:** More love I would say, ‘cause her arms are out wide, open. And she’s draped in the flag, I think, so that’s just kind of another love, love for this country.

**Jessica:** And what you think the other kind of love is?
Tanesha: It could be love for herself. And love for the United States. But she is being hated.

Jessica: So a big juxtaposition there, two very different ideas at once.

Tanesha: The background is like a stamp, yeah.

Jessica: That makes me think of heroes being valorized on stamps. Like who gets to be put on one? I guess that’s part of the artist’s argument, wouldn’t you say?

Tanesha: Yep. I do think so. Also, a stamp is like going from one place to the next. So there’s that too. It’s also usually dead people that get on stamps, isn’t it?

Jessica: Hmm… that is sort of another interpretation I guess. Yeah. Dead people. Hmm. Yeah.

Tanesha: Don’t people like, die crossing the border sometimes. You know like in the desert?

Jessica: So now I am thinking of other associations with red too, so for me it’s like love but also danger. I hadn’t thought of that.

What stands out from the transcript of my talk with Tanesha is the ways that we engage in embodied perception (Merleau-Ponty, 1967) that seemed to cultivate uncertainty as a catalyst for our theorizing. Although the images in general have a particular power to evoke feelings and emotions (Broudy, 1966), there is also a way in which we lack a lexicon for describing these responses that constitute aesthetic experience (DeBolla, 2001). What stands out to me most from the transcript, and from my memory of looking at the image with Tanesha, is how the image made me feel. She and I had opted to look at this piece of art in particular (students were given a choice), and I was drawn to the image by its color and form. I was curious about the blindfolded woman with arms outstretched in bold red and white. I was both taken by her open form, and disturbed by the blindfold eyes. Not knowing quite what to make of it, I was drawn in. When I look back at the transcript, I see that our ways of sense-making are both of the mind and the body. My aesthetic response, a felt eeriness of the image, made me want to know where that was coming from. The uncertainties created by the aesthetic form invited me in.

The expressive qualities of it, and the uncertainties they engendered, made me curious to
make sense of it, to theorize what could be going on here. As we made sense together, my interpretations of love and rage were deepened by Tanesha’s suggestion that the woman is being hated, that maybe her image is also being made red by hate. The notion that red could stand for all of these things, came about through a shared inquiry into the text – that it could stand for both how she feels and how others are positioning her.

In offering these alternatives, there was no assumption that there was one truth to be uncovered, but, instead, each of our ways of looking deepened the ways we were capable of thinking about a person’s lived experience. Could this woman feel both love and rage for her country? Could she be made red by hate? Is it possible that all of these could be true? What are the faces of the danger she feels? Since art draws the authoritative into question, these questions contributed to tentative ways of talking together about the image: I think, I suppose, I would say, It could be. Accepting the ambiguity of the visual text, required us to withhold knowing and adopt an inquiry stance (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009). It cultivated not knowing as a framework, an openness that Gadamer (1960) suggests is integral to learning something new. Like Zen practice, a goal of art is often said to maintain a beginner’s mind, where innovation is a necessary condition: “In the beginner’s mind,” it is said, “there are many possibilities, in the expert’s few” (Suzuki, 1970). Adopting beginner’s mind as a stance toward looking at art, served to cultivate a space of productive uncertainty on the part of both Tanesha and me, a pedagogical space of inquiry. Long associated with the practice of innovation in making art, students learned to bring this practice to English class; to cultivate a beginner’s mind, to be open to questions, to curiosity, and to theorizing and constructing new knowledge about the world.
This is Supposed to be Happy, It’s Disney!:
When World Reading Through Art Brings Dis-ease

Using art as a theoretical instrument can sometimes lead to interruptions of enjoyable texts. As students learn to look in new ways and see things formerly unseen, shocks of awareness have the potential to, at times, be painful and unwanted; they can cause “dis-ease” (Greene, 1995). Although difficult for both teachers and students, these moments can also be seen as sites of “constructive disruption” (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009). The study of literary lenses through Disney proved to be such a site because it disrupted many students’ ways of thinking about Fantasia as an enjoyable text. Seeking to provide students with new frames for world reading, Elle designed curriculum so that these frames could be applied to ways of looking at a range of art and media and started with Fantasia as a shared text. Like Nora, Elle wished to extend students’ capacities for text/world reading through the teaching of literary lenses. Rather than beginning by teaching the idea of literary theory directly, students in the ninth grade studied two film versions of Disney’s Fantasia and by analyzing the changes in the film over time and what aspects had been altered according to changing social norms and values, students effectively created conceptual categories that could be viewed as lenses for looking.

Initially, some of the ninth graders actively resisted the study of a Disney film in English class, and the analysis of the film from different lenses led to some unexpected resistance. The following excerpt, framing and explaining the source of the resistance was written by Elle as a reflection paper for work she had been doing with the Writing Project.¹⁴

Central to the collection of shorts in Fantasia is one titled “The Sorcerer’s Apprentice.” It features Mickey Mouse in rare form—as a trouble-making

¹⁴ Elle’s writing is a response to her four sections of English, not just the one I observed.
apprentice who steals his Sorcerer’s hat, attempts to wield the hat’s magic, and must deal with a resulting degree of calamity that pushes him to murder a broomstick. Many students were jolted by this disturbing image of Mickey Mouse, and wanted to further explore Mickey—an exploration that led us to an eye-opening connection between Mickey Mouse and the Blackfaced Minstrel … the implications of the information we came across suggesting that Disney created Mickey Mouse in the image of the Blackface Minstrel was most disturbing to kids and prompted at least a dozen of them to pursue research independently, self-motivated and without the promise of extra credit. For a few days, some students even reported that our classroom discussions were invading their lunch tables!

One of the most troubling aspects for students was to discover something that conflicted with their ideas about the film as being neutral and solely for enjoyment. “Disney is supposed to be happy,” Erin argued, “when you take it this far, it takes all the entertainment out of it.” Although it was common practice in the ninth grade to read, watch, interpret and inquire into the social context of any wide range of texts, as Lorraine pointed out in her writing, students felt additional uneasiness after watching a clip from the 1930s about black minstrel shows, one of the most popular forms of entertainment when Mickey Mouse was created. Some students became incensed by the possibility of racial stereotyping in Mickey Mouse, some resisted, and others were somewhat disturbed.

Raquel: The bow and gloves do look an awful lot like Mickey Mouse. But maybe he didn’t mean to do it, it may look the same but it is not necessarily based on this.
Morgan: Are the performers black or white? Were they making fun of black people?
Elle: The performances perpetuated stereotypes.
Aniya: That’s the most racist, ignorant thing ever. I feel mad just watchin’ it. Bein’ African American, and lookin’ back on it. That’s messed up! (pause)… Mickey doesn’t even look black or white, I just see a mouse! But why were the lips white? Lips are pink! That made me so mad! Copied hair. Big hair, okay. But yeah! We all come from the same place… that makes me mad. Man!
Melinda: Okay we traumatized Ms. U.
Elle: No, no.
Aniya: I’m just getting my feelings out!
Melinda: I will never look at Mickey Mouse the same again.
Erin: This is supposed to be happy! It’s Disney!
Jessica: Were the minstrel shows supposed to be happy?
Melinda: They were racist.
MacKenzie: Obviously it meant something then - not just for fun.
Aniya: What if it was a switcheroo?
Elle: I imagine they would have been arrested.
Khadija: Weren’t blacks denied if they wanted to go to the show?
Elle: Yes, segregated. Okay, we need to look at the next segment.
Many students: Yes, please.

In this exchange, students grapple with the possibility that Mickey could have been created, as a product of his time, along the lines of racial stereotyping. While they try to make sense of what the black-faced minstrel shows were about, students trouble Erin’s comment that since this is Disney, it’s supposed to be happy. Aniya’s response that it was the most ignorant thing ever, messed up, and made her mad just watching it, went on to become an enduring line of inquiry for Aniya as she encountered other texts throughout the school year and saw race as a lens for looking. Melinda’s comment that the minstrel shows were racist and MacKenzie’s that they meant something, not just for fun, raise troubling ideas for students around notions of fun, enjoyable, and entertainment. Their comment “yes, please” at the end, was not a comment said in eagerness to continue, but rather to move along. It was uncomfortable, and they wanted out.

The next day, students continued to work through their resistance. This set of comments represents a range of ways that students responded to the work they had done the day before:

Erin: I just can’t look at Mickey Mouse the same anymore.

Joe: It seems silly.

Melinda: There’s no meaning in it. It’s meant to enjoy.
Lys: I won’t understand climax any better. Last year I had English for two hours a day, but I think this is a little kid thing, not like *Mice and Men* - I spent most of last year on that.

Mark: We’re learning something about real life from things that are not real life. Erin was still discouraged and felt that her enjoyable memories had been irrevocably interrupted. Sam thought it was just silly. Melinda, who the day before had called the minstrel shows racist, insisted that Mickey had no connection and that there was no meaning in it - it was just meant to enjoy. Lys interpreted the work as silly and childish and as not as important as a classic text like *Of Mice and Men*. Finally, Mark suggested that they were learning something about real life from something that was not real life.

The assumption that some forms of art and media are solely for entertainment and therefore have no meaning, is an assumption that is amplified when it comes to art and media for young children. Although students were accustomed to studying and reading a range of texts in class, the introduction of a childhood classic that had fond memories for many of them, was deeply resisted. It was the only time I saw students argue, in effect (although not explicitly), that this piece, one they saw as solely for pleasure and enjoyment, did not count as text.

However, this argument and push-back is also relevant to a pervasive cultural bifurcation of the aesthetic and the critical: the notion that these capacities are either counter-productive (i.e. critical diminishes the pleasure of art) or oppositional (i.e. that the aesthetic is not accountable to critical approaches because it is open to anyone’s interpretation). While students were generally more able to take a critical stance, the fact that they brought strong associations and pleasurable experiences with Disney, made it difficult for them to occupy the doubting and believing stance that was more common to
their practice of using art as a theoretical instrument. As an example of what can happen when inquiry is generated through art as a theoretical instrument, it left Elle with many questions:

Although it provoked some of the year’s most transformative socio-cultural explorations, I questioned students’ abilities to cope with the dissonance caused by this unit. After all, their dreams of “happily ever afters” had just been replaced by the disappointing realities of “unhappily ever afters.” … Had the students been ready for the level of critical world reading we accomplished in the unit? Had I stolen hope from the lives of those students who relied on Disney movies and Mickey Mouse because they were some of the only sources of happiness in their complicated home lives? Are students at this grade level or stage in development capable of assimilating reality into their childhood illusions? Is it possible for students to be “happily unhappy” about the privileges of being informed rather than uninformed or ignorant? Should I continue to engage students at this grade level in these kinds of exercises in critical world reading?

Some students like Aniya, however, went on to describe in an interview to me how important this work was for her and why. She described it as something she could “actually relate to” because it was a way of “telling each other’s stories,” and “sharing opinions and thoughts.” This excerpt is taken from our interview:

Aniya: Like in Fantasia, the black minstrel, I kinda, I couldn’t relate to it but I like understood, as being African American how they would feel. And, it kinda made me feel some type of way, but I’m glad that we talk about such things in English class. It gives us like a new perspective.
Jessica: I understand. So, how do you think that using different modes - art forms besides print texts - how do you think using different texts is helpful for you to see different perspectives? How does that work?
Aniya: …Like the Fantasia story, we didn’t even know that it had a story behind it. We just thought it was like a regular movie. That was crazy, ‘cause I didn’t even know. When we started watching the old one and then watching the new one, I could see the contrast between those two.

For Aniya, looking at Fantasia was a way to raise important topics in English class that generated a range of perspectives. Looking through lenses, served as a way of enhancing what Aniya could do with art as a theoretical instrument. It made things formerly unseen
able to be seen. Although she was not happy about seeing them, she appreciated the opportunity and the space for “such things” to arise. As she describes, “feeling a certain kind of way” was Aniya’s shock into awareness with *Fantasia* and lenses study. As her comments show, the example can be viewed as a site of tension and disruption but ultimately generative, as a “constructive disruption.” For some, the orientation to *Fantasia* as constructive disruption happened over time. Lys, for example, one of the students most vocally resistant to reading Disney as a text, had this to say months later during an interview:

> Ms. U. (Elle) made English more than just the subject this year. But the way she uses things like the computer and slideshows and everything and opens discussions, is a better environment than just being like, sitting in a classroom, taking notes or whatever. And the certain things that she talks about like the videos or the podcasts that we listen to online, like isn’t about normal things you’d learn in English – it opens up your mind and I think that it shows you things that you wouldn’t have seen that way.

Here, she puts forth the idea that world reading, and inquiry into world through art “isn’t about normal things you’d learn in English.” Instead, she effectively argues that, through this inquiry using art as a theoretical instrument, she is opening her mind to seeing things she would otherwise not have seen. Speaking to ways that multiple perspectives through multiple texts and lenses have made her more open to ideas, she went on to say:

> I’ve taken other peoples’ opinions better than I used to ‘cause like I used to really not like ignorant words… and I wouldn’t really acknowledge other feelings and like if I felt something I wouldn’t think twice about it but like after a while, I was just like, I started to see things in just different ways and even if I didn’t agree with them, I would like want to understand why other people felt that way. And I wasn’t like that before.

Despite Lys’s resistance to *Fantasia*, Lys is clearly finding value in the study of a range of text, in world reading, and in opening to multiple perspectives.
Extending Art as Engagement

The inclusion of art in school is often talked about in terms of engaging students, but here, the use of art as a theoretical instrument went beyond engagement to serve as a vehicle for transformation. Rather than engaging students in work toward predetermined outcomes, art made room for the unexpected and the multiple; it had an orientation toward change. The expectation was that new ways of thinking and understanding would be developed individually and collectively through art, and that these understandings would be necessarily multiple, divergent, and at times contested. Learning to look in different ways and through different lenses, combined with the inclusion of many forms of text, changed the way knowledge was constructed. As I mentioned earlier in this chapter, Eisner (2002) describes the curriculum as “a mind-altering device.” This is in part, he argues, because particular kinds of thinking are afforded by particular forms of representation:

Consider the implications of the selection of content in the school curriculum. Learning to use particular forms of representation is also learning to think and represent meaning in particular ways. How broad is the current distribution? What forms of representation are emphasized? In what forms are students expected to become literate? What modes of cognition are stimulated, practiced and refined by the forms that are made available? (Eisner, 2002, p.9.)

In this chapter, I have aimed to show how many forms of representation encouraged embodied world reading and awareness through the imagination, inquiry, wonder, and uncertainty. But it was not just the inclusion of many forms but the inquiry as stance approach (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009) that encouraged world reading and awareness through the imagination, wonder, and uncertainty. That is, I want to underscore both the curriculum and the approach to teaching it. There could be ways to imagine, for
example, using multiple forms of art and modalities in other ways, ways that promoted different kinds of thinking. Much of the work in arts integration in today’s climate of high stakes testing has been targeted at engagement in order to achievement something known, defined, and measureable. Art may encourage imagination, inquiry, wonder and uncertainty, but it does not do so by definition.

Instead, using art as a theoretical instrument here, occupied a stance that assumed art can be a catalyst for students’ inquiries, ideas, theories and questions. It served as a way of designing curriculum that encouraged students’ curiosities and sought divergence of outcome and multiple perspectives versus singular ones. There was a way in which, although carefully designed, the outcome could not be fully determined, what Ellsworth (2005) might call a pedagogy of “experimentation in thought” rather than “representation of knowledge as a thing already made.” This distinction, she argues, creates “a profound shift in how we think about pedagogical intent or volition – the will to teach” (p.27).

Extrapolating on this shift, she says:

The will to teach then becomes thinkable in terms of a distributed, emergent desire to innovate, design, and stage materials of expression and conditions of learning so that something new may arise (p.28).

To engage in a kind of pedagogy that used art as a theoretical instrument where the outcomes do not exist a priori but are invented in the process is risky territory for teachers in the context of knowledge transmission approaches pervasive in current discourses about teaching. Elle described her pedagogical intent, for example, as teaching students to “learn to see:”

Really, in the end, if every student is engaged and curious somehow, and learning how to observe, and to really see and just to reflect on the things they encounter
every day, and to see them, not necessarily as texts, but just to be able to read things… that would be my one goal.

Her words link seeing and perceiving to curiosity, things she sought to encourage through the inclusion of many forms of representation and modalities and through teaching students how to look closely and in different ways. Casting back to chapter four, Elle had also said that her hopes had to do with cultivating innovation, that she hoped students would learn to see what the world needs and know what they have to offer that need. Innovation, in this way, cannot be cultivated according to fixed outcomes and thrives within an opening of the curriculum versus a narrowing of it. Given the ways this idea is so counter to current discourses about outcomes, Elle spoke to some of the challenges she felt, particularly as a new teacher:

Some kids seem to get it, and they trust where I’m taking them… and then you witnessed that one period where they were like, “Why?”… “Why are we doing this (Fantasia)?”… So, I’m not only questioned, I think, by colleagues, but by students, who have been learning in classrooms, in my colleagues’ classrooms or in classrooms elsewhere where the teaching was more traditional. I am always afraid of how, what they are thinking about the work we’re doing here, and whether it is valuable to them and if they question whether I know what I’m doing. So, I would say I see that.

Likewise, Nora spoke in powerful ways about her work and similar tensions in terms of reconciling what counts for whom as doing the job of teaching English:

I think that it (transmission of knowledge) is really valued and I think it is what is considered, sort of, doing your job, as an English teacher, so that’s my biggest struggle. I don’t want to not do my job, obviously. I don’t want to do a disservice to students, but I can’t imagine teaching that way - these are the themes, memorize them. I could…. I don’t know…but I struggle with it because… that’s valued, and because that’s considered doing your job… and that these kids will be very smart and educated if they do that, you know?

As she holds her practice up to the light, Nora’s comments raise important questions about what it means to do a disservice to students in teaching English in the 21st century.
Not limited to arts-based teaching, these issues are punctuated by questions around teaching with and through the arts and what kinds of learning arts-based teaching hopes to encourage. Nora and Elle, and many teachers like them, are working both within and against what counts as understanding in school contexts. The kinds of learning they cultivated were not singular understandings or discrete skills, but instead intentionally designed opportunities to generate wide, deep, and multiple understandings through arts-based literacy as a form of inquiry and theorizing.

**Conclusion**

In this chapter, students used art as a theoretical instrument in ways that placed theoretical thinking and their individual and collective world sense-making at the center of the curriculum. Students learned to see connections between aesthetic texts and their lived worlds. Art as a theoretical instrument sought to engage the imagination, “the faculty that envisages possibilities” (Rorty, 1988), and promote inquiry. Students imagined what it was like to be Laila and Mariam through art, saw themselves as translators of language in a poem, considered visual art as expressive of embodied aspects of an immigrant experience, and tested ways of looking at art to see what could be found there. Art provided opportunities for inquiry as a lived-through experience, and shifted learning toward a process of discovery versus a thing to be found. This approach to using art as a theoretical instrument for inquiry and world reading surprised many students who noticed their changing roles as more active meaning-makers in school. Anik, for example, spoke to the way that learning through art helped her to build an agentive school identity that she described as “using my mind the way I want to:”
This is going to sound weird, but I get a chance to use my mind the way I want to. You know what I mean? At my old school you always had to… walk this way, learn this way. We never got a chance to explore anything! It was like if you went outside to see a butterfly, then you came right back in. You never got to… it was like: ‘This is a butterfly. This is how a chrysalis is made.’

Having opportunities to use their minds the way they wanted to, led students like Anik to see themselves as inquirers, and as agents of their own learning. And, it felt unusual and ‘weird.’ Mark put this act of opening more simply but in an equally powerful way when he said: “I’ve learned I am becoming someone who sees himself as looking up into the sky rather than into the bushes.” Looking up into the sky, conveys the opening and freedom that Mark felt to engage his imagination and expand his interpretive and existential possibilities.

Seneca characterized her experience with arts-based literacy as changing the way she thought about meaning-making and her interpretive repertoire:

In the beginning of the year, I remember the first day I came into this room actually. We were listening to Pink Floyd’s “Another Brick in the Wall” and I was thinking, ‘Why are we listening to this?’ Like, I love the song, but it’s just like, I don’t know why we’re listening to this. This isn’t going to help me at all.’ And then, I was listening to everyone talking and it was like… it makes so much more sense now…to hear a song and have someone talk about it, all these different things. It just helped me so much more. And it helped me open my mind to like, maybe I can read more than a textbook, maybe it’s okay to use different things to help me with my schoolwork.

When I asked Seneca to elaborate on what she meant by using different things to help her with her schoolwork, she said:

Well, in middle school, I was just using… let me go online and type in exactly what I need, and then it’s just like, let me research from there, or just read a book and research from there. But when I came here, just immediately - well, it wasn’t immediate, it took a little bit of time, but it was basically pretty quick, and it was like, it’s okay for me to take a song that sounds like it could go along with this, and try to listen to the song [to] try and help me understand this. Or, it’s okay for me to watch a movie, or even read a different type of book, to try to help me
understand this book if they’re similar. And to me, like, that’s a new way of
learning. Because it’s like, not only is it like, opening your mind more to like, how the world is, like it makes for me… it makes the world make a little bit more
sense.

For Seneca, a ‘new way of learning’ meant learning to read different texts and to see the
connections among them as helping her to learn. It meant seeing that making these
connections could both help her with her ‘schoolwork’ and help her learn to see ‘how the
world is.’ I was struck by Seneca’s characterization of how this happened “in a bit of
time, but basically pretty quick.” For Seneca, the lines between meaning-making in
school and meaning-making in life, began to blur in powerful ways that opened up what
she saw as her meaning-making repertoire. The idea that she was learning that she could
read more than a textbook, that she could use different art forms and media and texts to
make sense of things, was a deeply transformative shift in her thinking, early in the ninth
grade, about what it meant to learn in school. Her realization that ‘maybe it’s okay to use
different things to help me with my schoolwork,’ speaks to the harmful and damaging
ways that students come to see schoolwork as disassociated from their lives. That Seneca
would learn that to make these connections among texts is not only okay but valuable,
conveys a powerful change in her orientation toward school, meaning-making, text, and
art. Through inquiry and through art as a theoretical instrument, Seneca came to see
school, surprisingly to her, as a place that helped her to make the world ‘make a little more
sense.’ Her words speak to the promise of finding new ways of theorizing and inquiring
with ninth and tenth grade students, in order to expand their capacities for making-
meaning in and from their lives. In the next chapter, I look to describe the collective
capacities that were engaged through arts-based learning, and how students came to see
their work in knowing themselves and the world through art as community-in-the-making and as collective action.
Chapter VI

Cultivating Aesthetic Practice: Arts-Based Literacy as Collective Action

Introduction

Within a participatory pedagogy, students were invited through the processes of self-reflexivity described in chapter four, and the inquiry and world reading described in chapter five, to engage in work that was both individual and collective. Although students had been engaged in collective work all along, there is a way in which the design of the pedagogy and curriculum followed an arc toward greater collectivity as the year went on. The last two chapters described how students at Tobin engaged with art in their English classes as a way to distinguish and know themselves and to learn about the world around them in a relational context. This work in becoming more awake to a range of ways of thinking, has implications and effects on the ways we engage with ourselves and with others. hooks (1994) argues that collective work is necessarily preceded by self-work, that to know and understand ourselves helps us to understand others. Although the individual and collective processes were not discrete, but rather continuously and
recursively engaged, I focus in this chapter on the collective. In particular, I look at students’ collective work as action.

A phenomenological approach to arts-based literacy is concerned with what it means to engage with art and literacy with others. It is predicated on the idea that human beings are always in the world together and make meaning through intersubjective communication. This intersubjective communication is necessarily embodied. We come to understand ourselves in relation to others, and through the body as a holistic practice of seeing, hearing, and feeling (Gadamer, 1960). Pedagogically, as Ellsworth (2005) argues, this means that “learning involves cognition, but never direct, unmediated cognition. Learning never takes place in the absence of bodies, place, time, sound, image, self-experience, history” (p.55). In this chapter, I explore students’ embodied and collective meaning-making and action. I look at how a pedagogy that encouraged aesthetic practice engaged hearts and minds to create spaces where students engaged in collective action.

The action I am going to describe is action performed by the everyday experience and practice of teachers and students in an English classroom. In this chapter, I will argue that the aesthetic practices that students and teachers developed were a form of action. This action was embodied in the way that students and teachers engaged with one other through arts-based literacy – through their dialogue, through bearing witness, through making and viewing art together, and through opening to one another’s experiences across social differences. Extending the work of the last two chapters, where I described how students came to see art as story, to see their lives as works of art, and to use art as a theoretical instrument to inquire, imagine, and see through many angles and with many
eyes, this chapter explores the collective action that was enabled when students learned to engage in diverse ways of knowing and seeing themselves, the world, and each other.

My interest in the collective aspects of pedagogy at Tobin was aroused by the relational work I saw happening in the classroom, and then further piqued by the way that students overwhelmingly characterized their school and learning experiences in it. Ninth graders in particular, perhaps because they were new to the school, all spoke passionately about a strong community ethos in some way, describing, often with some element of surprise or awe, how well people “got along,” “listened,” and how “there were never any fights.” These comments often had to do with teachers as well as students “the teachers care what we think,” or the “students have a bond now because we listen to each other.” Surprised by this classroom and school culture, one ninth grader Raquel, described to me a social experiment she performed during her first semester at the school:

**Raquel:** Like, I thought in high schools there are different cliques like, the populars, the jocks, the nerds, and like, here, *everyone* gets along, I noticed. At lunch I did like kind of like a test. And like, I went around to every single table that there is, and I sat down for like, the whole lunch period. And I noticed that like, everywhere you sit, you fit in.

**Jessica:** Did you tell people you were doing this?

**Raquel:** No, I didn’t tell them, I just sat. And everywhere I went they were welcoming.

In addition to what I heard and observed, the principal, in describing to me what she was most proud of, cited: “how kids treat each other, decency, a culture of kindness, no yelling, student leadership, comfort (students are not afraid), and ownership.” Ethos is, of course both situated and invented – some students may have come to the school this way, the special admissions process likely played a role, and many students spoke to their opportunities to pursue their art area as a factor contributing to the sense of energy in this
place. However, I became very interested in the pedagogical factors contributing to this culture. Despite the host of other factors that contributed to the ethos, much of the data I collected suggested that arts-based pedagogy and curriculum played a significant role in how students worked and learned together in this place.

**Raquel:** Here, like Ms. U wants to know what we think about everything. She wants to know what we learn, what we think, and what our opinions are.

**Aniya:** Ms U makes it so you can actually get into it. We can actually relate to it. So we relate to our stories and it’s fun.

An arts-based school does not secure a collectively-minded ethos; art schools can at times be competitive and individualistic places, which made me wonder, what aspects of this culture of collectivity were being cultivated, nurtured, extended in the English classroom by the pedagogy and the curriculum? An important part of my study became better understanding the role of pedagogy and curriculum in this ethos - to explore the relationships between community and arts-based practices in the classroom. The focus of this chapter is on the particular kind of community that was nurtured and enacted through arts-based literacies. In this chapter, I hope to make visible the ways in which a participatory, collective community was not accidental, but carefully and intentionally planned and enacted as an ongoing project.

**The Art-Based Classroom as Relational Space**

Art, by nature, has the potential to do collective work. Merleau-Ponty (1967) said that aesthetics recognizes the permeability of the boundaries that we construct between the self and others. Work that encourages interconnectedness and collectivity, that permeates boundaries between the self and others, is counter to how schooling for adolescents is typically designed around individualist frameworks and measures. And, a
The culture of interconnectedness and collectivity was neither accidental, nor guaranteed by art. The presence of art alone is not enough to permeate boundaries; it only has the potential to do so. This is because, as Merleau-Ponty, Dewey, and others have argued, art *enables* aesthetic experience, it does not provide it. To be sure, one can look at art and one can make art without an aesthetic experience. When students learn about art as a commodity to be consumed or understood, when they make art for the teacher to get the job done and to get a grade, aesthetic experience is not likely to occur. This chapter explores the conditions under which opportunities through arts-based literacy were designed to permeate boundaries and promote collective action through the cultivation of shared aesthetic experience.

The notion of relational space is helpful to make sense of how aesthetic experience and the permeability of boundaries was realized. Art exists in relation to bodies and lived experience. Whether it is created or viewed, and alone or with others, art is meant to be in conversation with the viewer, and subsequently with many viewers with each other. And indeed, one of the great values of art is that it can create a shared experience and encourage a response and a sharing of beliefs, worlds, and differences. This relational function of art took on an important role in Nora and Elle’s classrooms. In the classroom, art required that students bring their subjective visions to the classroom community. As DeBolla (2001) argues, art can be seen as a terrain or a space upon which to map subjective visions, beliefs, and a wide range of experiences. Through these encounters with the art and with each other, students are required to make intersubjective sense, in relation to what each person brings to the work. Through this sense-making, students come to discover what they have in common, see differences, understand beliefs,
and come to develop emerging solidarities. This relational context is a helpful lens for understanding the kinds of aesthetic experience that were cultivated in Nora and Elle’s classes to enable collective action.

Intersubjective sense-making around art requires a dance between knowing and coming to know the self and coming to know others and their experiences across difference. It requires moving from the individual and single-storied to the collective and multi-voiced. This dance between the individual and the collective was talked about in different ways by students. Ninth grader Melinda told me that at this school, “you can find yourself within finding other people.” Tenth grader Anik had ideas about how both individual and collective identities were positioned as resources in school, how arts-based teaching and learning positioned difference within community:

I like how diverse the school is – I like that our school is like that because we all get to see other peoples’ lives and understand them. And … I think it’s cool because, sometimes if you stay in your same elements with the same people, you don’t get to explore or understand or experience anything ‘cause, it’s like if somebody ever asks you like, so have you ever talked to a certain race of person, they’re like, ‘no, I’ve only been around so and so.’ It’s like, everybody gets to be yourself here, even if you’re not the same, you get to be yourself. And I feel like even with the education, we’re all still taught as like one which feels really nice, but we’re not being brought down because they don’t think that if you’re from a certain background that you don’t learn as fast, or that you can’t learn anything.

Getting to see other peoples’ diverse lives and understand them was as an important way that students talked about their collective experience, about what it meant to learn among others and through art at Tobin. Anik’s comment echoes many that recognized the role of learning from other students in this classroom environment, and the role that the collective plays in leveraging diverse experiences. In other words, Anik experiences difference as a rich resource in the classroom as students are recognized as having both
individual and collective identities; “you get to be yourself”, and you are taught as “one.” “Feeling really nice” and “not being brought down” speaks to the way that difference was widely talked about as a resource, an opportunity, and a source of learning. Relational space through art, in this way, created a space not unlike what Anzaldúa describes as sites of cultural contact, sites where diverse people come into contact and where the space between two individuals shrinks with intimacy (p.i). Much like the way Anzaldúa describes the energy of living on borders and in margins, Anik speaks to an exhilaration involved in this contact, in being both “not the same” and “one,” and working collectively.

Haley spoke specifically to the ways that art served as place for mapping cultural experiences in the classroom, and to the kind of learning environment this created where students could bring their “culture,” which she broadly defines, to their work. Again, Haley’s comments, similar to Anik, speak to both making space for cultural differences, and coming together though art:

I think it’s really cool like being brought together by the things that we love to do. Even things like, you know, even your arts and stuff, you bring your culture and the way you were raised… and we have a lot of different cultures… and culture is a lot of different things. It’s not just your ethnicity, but like your family, the friends you hang out with, like the way you feel about yourself, and other people. So, it’s definitely like you can incorporate culture and arts and it can come together to make a really great, safe, academic, and supportive society.

Haley describes a culturally relevant approach to teaching (Ladson-Billings, 1992) where the students are not required to fit the school culture but to use their cultures, individual and collective, to build knowledge. Bringing your culture, as Haley describes it, is a way of bringing subjectivity to art. And this subjectivity, she goes on to say, contributes to a vibrant school culture, one that is safe, academic, and supportive. Although she is
describing school, Haley suggests that what is good for school is also good for the social order writ large, when she substitutes the word society for school, arguing that intercultural communication through art, is not only good for school, but is good for society.

**Multivocality as Action**

Bakhtin (1981) argued that life is, by nature, dialogic. As we live, we participate in dialogue to ask questions, to respond, to seek alliance, to differ, and we do so wholly and through the body and throughout our lives. Dialogic interaction was a central component of arts-based learning across both classes. This talk was not individual transaction between the student and the work of art, nor was it a collective pursuit toward a fixed meaning. Instead, the classroom was seen as a place to cultivate the kinds of talk around art that sustained individual and collective inquiry. Encouraging an inquiry stance, multiple ways of perceiving were invited as ways of enriching the collective discourse, rather than detracting from it. Ellsworth has described talk that captures multiple ways of perceiving as multivocal, because of the ways it makes space for multiple voices beyond a two-way discourse. An integral aspect of the aesthetic practice at Tobin was the platform it created for multivocality by learning through and with a range of art forms and modalities accompanied by a pedagogical stance, as described in chapter five, that encouraged multiple ways of looking and perceiving. When I asked students about what stood out about the discussion in their classes, many spoke of the opportunities they felt they had to access and learn from multiple perspectives:

**Isabelle:** I think it’s interesting and I like seeing everyone’s perspectives because when we get into a conversation… you know everyone’s allowed to like, say their perspectives and see what people think, so I like that. That’s really cool too. ‘Cause you know like, you don’t have to keep what’s in you inside, you can let it go, and just say what you think. And it’s cool because everyone has different
perspectives, so you could probably see things one way and when you look at it someone else’s way, you probably learn something new.

Different than conversation aimed at shared meaning, Isabelle speaks to conversation that by its nature, seeks multiple perspectives as way of learning something new, different ways of seeing. Isabelle’s comments above speak to the ways that students developed ways of sense-making together that sought multivocality. In contrast to more dominant discourses around text that seek one meaning, this practice is seen as a form of action, as a way of working toward a different vision of schooling. By framing her contributions as a liberty - “everyone’s allowed to say their perspective” (emphasis mine), Victoria expresses a sense of freedom that she feels in a multivocal space. For students, these came to be ways of being and talking to others in the world.

Similarly, Lys described how the discussions were not simply activities but a different way of learning in school and told me: “Here we do discussions instead of worksheets. It’s kind of a different way to learn.” For Lys, this different way to learn was also related to the ways of working collectively and in conversation with others. This interaction, she told me, was unfamiliar, both in relation to school and home. She prefaced her comments by telling me that she didn’t really talk at home “unless it was absolutely necessary” and that at school she didn’t “have to show that same kind of respect.” She went on to describe the ways of talking that were cultivated in English class:

Like, at first I’m a very closed off person and I don’t trust people. I don’t open… like there’s a wall that is always there. But Ms. U. made it a lot easier to talk about things because you don’t exactly have to talk about it like in a detailed way for her to understand what you’re trying to say. And, what you say doesn’t really leave the room, like I sit with some kids from my English class or like I’ll have a different class with them and what is said isn’t like repeated, like knowing that
and like, I don’t know if other people see it, but like realizing that like people don’t repeat things, it’s easier to say what you’re thinking. And… the way Ms. U takes in what you say…

When I asked Lys what she had learned most in English class so far, she described opening to other people’s ideas and perspectives:

I’ve taken other peoples’ opinions better than I used to ‘cause I used to really not like ignorant words, and I wouldn’t really acknowledge other feelings and if I felt something, I wouldn’t think twice about it, but like, after a while, I was just like, I started to see things in different ways, and even if I didn’t agree with them, I would like, want to understand why other people felt that way. And, I wasn’t like that before.

Lys’s comments suggest that multivocal dialogue requires an opening, an opening to other peoples’ opinions, to be able to acknowledge difference. Moreover, she describes how opening to multivocal discourse, over time, enabled her to see things in different ways, and enabled a greater understanding of other people. Most of all, she describes this as transformative to her way of being in the world: “I wasn’t like that before.” Dialogue that can promote this kind of understanding is a dialogue of action. It has to do with coming to act in the world differently, what bell hooks might call ‘engaged pedagogy.’

Discussion has long been a vital means by which a teacher draws students into the critical reading of a novel through continuous rereading of the world. At Tobin, students were invited to talk about a wide range of art and texts as a primary mode of engagement. Importantly, ways of talking were not assumed to be known, but were part of the project of inquiry in the class. Teachers invited students to talk in different ways, to reflect on their talk, and to cultivate more open, democratic and humane ways of talking to each other as a project. Some examples from the tenth grade of the range and variation of participation structures for talk include: a thesis statement party in the form of cocktail
hour with snacks and drinks, student-led discussions, choices about participation roles in discussion (for instance as a discussion leader, participant, or sometimes having the option to write rather than talk), silent conversations, days where discussion was a graded activity, Socratic seminar, debriefings of various discussion processes. In these ways, Nora and Elle built into the design, opportunities for students to create the kind of dialogic culture they desired in the classroom. For instance, one morning Nora put large blank chart paper on all the walls and asked students to describe what “bothered and offended them” in discussions, what “made them think,” and what were their “favorite kinds of discussions.”

Counter to the ways that dialogue is sometimes seen by students as “just talk,” they described it as doing important work in their learning. Taken together, the comments suggest a desire for dialogue that is open to new ideas (someone bringing something new, something I have never thought of); that is about things that matter to students (our lives, things we can relate to, breaking stereotypes, other people’s views, religion, making a difference in the world); that is respectful in interaction (one person at a time, everyone’s opinions, circle set-up, responding to one another); and that has depth (go beyond the obvious, people building on to each other’s ideas). Although adolescent development happens relationally whether we plan for it or not, the development of relational identities between and among students and their teachers, as this example suggests, was an explicit part of the project of the curriculum and pedagogy of English class. And as this example demonstrates, it was co-constructed by teachers and students. In other words, norms for conversation were not set for the group by the teacher at the beginning of the year, nor were they developed by the class in one conversation;
instead they were co-constructed by teachers in an ongoing way and embedded in the work that they were doing. This from-the-ground-up approach to talk, was embedded in and borne of their work in arts-based literacy.

When art takes on a collective role, it shares many of the goals of more recent work in the field of public art and community art. Much recent work in these fields has sought to reach diverse audiences, address issues of race, gender, homelessness, urbanization, and ecology, through participatory events that seek to build community through dialogue (Lacy, 1994; Bishop, 2006; Goldbard, 2006; Atlas & Korza, 2005). Sometimes, under the umbrella of cultural democracy, and sometimes referred to as arts-based civic dialogue, this movement views artwork as something to be lived through and as an opening for discussion. It shifts viewers from having roles as passive observers to being producers of collective knowledge. The kinds of action that arts-based literacy encouraged at Rush had much in common with community art and public art, as a sites of apprenticeship for democracy through participation and dialogue.

For example, all tenth grade students read the play *The Laramie Project*. The play, by Moisés Kauffman and members of the Tectonic Theater Project, tells the story of the reaction of the town of Laramie, Wyoming to the 1998 murder of gay teen Matthew Shepard. Performed across the country and abroad, the play has inspired many grassroots efforts to combat homophobia and drawn critical attention to hate crime laws. The design of the play has also drawn attention for its polyvocal representation of voices and perspectives of the people of Laramie, Wyoming in response to the crime. The year that I spent at Tobin, a string of teen gay suicides in high schools and colleges across the country, had brought the issue of bullying to the fore, and drew mounting awareness to
the statistic that suicides among gay teens were four times higher than their straight peers. Nora’s text selection throughout the year sought a range of texts about different aspects of social justice, and different ways of seeing injustice and as another opening for talking about difference. Each text she chose, she described as helping students to “situate themselves a little differently to the idea that injustice is more this universal thing.” Speaking to the potential benefits of reading the play, she said:

I agree, I think every teenager would benefit from reading it, and particularly here. In our school community there is sort of this generalized acceptance… but obviously there are unspoken things that go on… like anything else, it’s not obviously out in the world, it’s very hidden, like most prejudice is, but that’s part of it. I think they’re very poised and ready for that conversation in a thoughtful way.

Reading and talking about the play, served as a site for students to discuss the range of perspectives in the play and their own lives and experiences and questions. The play was read aloud by students and discussion functioned as it did with many texts, as primary to collective sense-making. As one of the participation structures, students were graded on a conversation format where small groups would plan for and talk in fishbowl in the center of the room while others listened. A discussion would follow with the whole group. Nora told students:

This is not just reporting out. So, you shouldn’t just sit around in a circle, but rather try to engage each other’s ideas, to engage each other in dialogue. You should be listening attentively. That’s why you’re in the small group discussion or on the outside. And lastly, make sure that you’re speaking often, speaking thoughtfully, and speaking to the text.

Students were eager to engage the fishbowl activity. In the last chapter, I described art as a theoretical instrument for world reading. I described how world reading through art can

15 At the time of this study, the Utah state Senate passed a bill that would allow schools to drop sex education, prohibit instruction on how to use contraception, and prohibit discussion of homosexuality in class.
create shocks of awareness, and shifts in perception. The example I share below shows how these shocks into awareness took on an added dimension when they happened as shared texts in a public space through talk. This excerpt is taken from one of the fishbowl discussion groups. In it, one student describes her shock of awareness that she encountered in the ‘harsh’ language of the play and how seeing the words through art encouraged her to see slurs differently:

**Tanesha:** I kinda want to start and make a little statement about the book, or the play or whatever. Like, I wanted to say, well, the question, “is anti-gay language the same as violence? Why or why not? What about racial slurs, ethnic jib, or other discriminatory language?” And, I wanted to say like, I think the anti-gay language *is* like an act of violence or whatever and like, in the second essay I had, you know, I mentioned this, like little personal incident where I got mad at somebody and I called them like, you know, gay or whatever, but you know, like I didn’t really mean it, and when we were reading the play and I realized the interviews, seemed so much harsher… like when you say it… it doesn’t really sound as affective, but when you read it in the play, it just sounds like, really harsh and mean, it just made me feel kinda bad, or whatever. You know, it made me feel a whole lot harsher.

Art has the power to change to way we see things by re-contextualizing them. In this passage, Tanesha speaks to the group about what it meant for her to read gay slurs in the play, and what it sounded like to hear them read aloud by her peers. Her comment speaks to the way that art can stabilize an idea so that it can be examined, theorized, questioned, and experienced. In this way, it slows down perception, and gives pause in new ways – it makes space for dwelling on something we may not have taken notice of in lived experience. As Tanesha shared this insight in group talk, she spoke her awareness publicly. Rather than a quiet moment of shock into awareness between Tanesha and the work of art, it was, through dialogue, made visible and became a form of action.
Tanesha’s comment became a new text for students, as they considered her reaction and placed themselves in relation to it, and in the context of larger society. In this next excerpt, students respond to Tanesha’s comments and negotiate the personal and societal responsibilities of discrimination:

**Tanesha:** Especially if the person is like, say you get into an argument or whatever, they may act feminine and your first thought is, ‘oh they’re gay.’ Like even if they’re out on the down-low, it’s still hurtful either way. Like I said, I was reading the play and they said all that stuff, and he was like, what? you just called me a faggot? And all that stuff. I just felt like ‘Oh my God’… it really affected me.

**Aurora:** I think sometimes you say things… you may not mean it as offensive as they feel it. When people say things or make fun of him, they just thought, well, that’s what he is, I’m calling him gay or the other word, and you don’t realize that actually bothers him because if he says something about you and what’s important to you, it is going to hurt, even if they’re telling you is what you are.

**Avery:** I took some offense from the play. I know people who are gay and know that they go through that …and knowing what they did to him…

**Anik:** Do you feel like if society wasn’t against or wasn’t particular against being gay, do you think people would be more accepting? Like, actually not be so… ‘since the world doesn’t like them I don’t have to.’ Do you think because of society, that’s more why? More violent? Like, because of general stereotypes?

**Aurora:** I think that definitely contributes, because what we were talking about before, like the whole unknown thing, makes you just base your opinion on what everyone else says, so I definitely think that like…what media and society says, you just go along with it.

Dialogue expands our interpretive possibilities by making our thoughts public and open to other perspectives and experiences. In this exchange, the three students move collaboratively between their own stories and a continuous rereading of the world. Rather than discuss what the play meant, students made their own meaning from the art relationally through talk. One person’s shock into awareness served as a site for other students to learn from, question, and extend upon. At first Aurora is not sure, Avery is offended, Anik suggests that society may also be to blame, and Aurora questions the role of the individual in relationship to society. In each their own way, but in response to
Tanesha’s public shock of awareness, students came to think in different ways about seeing language as violence.

**Compassion as a Mode of Critical Inquiry**

Arts-based literacy was also talked about in terms of the ways it encouraged mindfulness as a way of being in the world relationally. Mindfulness encourages students to pay attention to what they ordinarily would not notice. Students talked about how learning to perceive differently and to see in new ways required being mindful and aware of themselves and others both internally and externally. For example, Nicole described how an arts-based practice that encouraged mindfulness to both interiority and community was going to help her make more informed choices in the future:

> We’re gonna know things because we’ve been taught to analyze things and look deeper than what meets the eye. And to try and think like, what we *should* do and what we *think* we should do, instead of what society tells us to do. And, at the same time, we learn to use our major to help us and to create like, better lives for ourselves.

Arts-based literacy helped students to cultivate this stance that Nicole describes, to “to think what we *should* do” versus what society tells us to do. That Nicole underscored the words *think* and *should* is not insignificant. As I wrote in chapter four, the aesthetic assumes that the body is an organizing core of experience. Thinking and feeling are often bifurcated capacities in school, and schools are generally constructed as places of the mind with little regard to the body. Arts-based literacy served as a way of mending this bifurcation and as Woolf said, “bringing the severed parts together” (1976). When students learned to think what they should do, they learned to listen to both their hearts and minds.
Maxine Greene (1995) has said that imagination brings an ethical concern to the fore (p.35). Different from a fixed moral code to live by, an ethical concern encourages mindfulness in the sense that it requires an ongoing stance of looking inward and outward, a constant recalibration of the inner and outer selves. As Nicole pointed out, what I think I should do, requires consultation with the inner self. And as O’Reilley (1993) points out, schools in general do a very poor job of cultivating an inner self; students are not often encouraged or even welcomed to consult their inner selves, their hearts and their minds. Art-based literacy was a space for students like Nicole to cultivate a mindful practice that paid attention to the internal and the external: What matters to me? What matters to others? How do I know? Aesthetic practice cultivated both heart and mind work.

I started to notice ways that students referred to, and talked about school as heart and mind work. In particular, I noticed how they talked about links between the heart and the collective, and the ways in which it was talked about as such an unfamiliar capacity to draw upon in school.

**Mark:** At my other school that I went to, like we had yeah, we had literature but it was mainly, I mean like, vocab words and, you know, it was mainly on that… reading. I don’t know. But in (Ms. U’s) class it makes me think because it’s like, some of the things she touches on are so like, sentimental. I don’t know. Like it’s weird. In a good way.

**Jessica:** Can you give me an example?

**Mark:** Uhm like racism. I never like, was a victim of that or anything, or I never did it to anyone, but I’ve seen it and it’s like, people are so blinded. They think it’s a joke, you know? … I take it all in, and then I give how I feel, ‘cause I like to think first and then get everybody’s you know, agree/disagree and that’s how I learn… that’s one of the reasons why I love it, because it’s like, you get to hear everybody’s again, like perspective, and it’s like, we grow and we have such a bond now, that it’s like, we could say the littlest of things and you know, take it into consideration.
The pedagogy of the heart and mind that Mark describes feels weird and unusual to him, a different kind of reading than studying vocabulary words. Here, Mark describes the heart as a catalyst to encourage him to think. And furthermore, this thinking and engaging together on ‘sentimental’ topics (ie. race) encourages what he calls a bond between students, a bond that makes them more attentive one another’s ideas. The sentimental aspects that Mark describes are the heart as a way of knowing, not the heart as a sentimental faculty (O’Reilley, p. 85). O’Reilley calls this, compassion as a mode of critical inquiry. She also calls this intellectual compassion, based on the idea that compassion and the intellect are not separate, and instead, are interrelated and necessary faculties to communicate and understand each other across social difference.

Compassion requires being open to interpretive perspectives, the language of inquiry, and listening to others.

Speaking to what this relational and collective understanding meant to students, Lys described developing an understanding not only of her own ideas in relation to others, but an understanding of others, the way others think and how they learn:

Well, like, different people even just in English class have different lives, and go through different things, and it affects the way they think and who they are overall. And like, one person might have been brought up with something that made them more open or more closed off, or one person might think more outside the box than another person because of past experience. So, I think depending on what you go through, it makes you who you are and how you learn.

Lys argues that in order to work with and talk among other students, it is necessary to try to understand them, where they are coming from, why they may think the way they do, and how they might learn. Hanh (1987) argues that understanding and compassion are not different; they are the same thing. This would suggest that as students develop
understanding of each other, they build compassion. They learn to engage in compassion as a mode of critical inquiry. Likewise, Ariana expressed how developing a capacity to understand multiple perspectives is an integral pathway to developing empathy. She said:

If you’re in one class learning perspective is important, you’re kind of going to use that in other parts of your life. So, whether it be critiquing someone’s art, it sort of just goes on to having empathy and having a perspective for somebody else’s like, feelings and the situations going on in their life, and being able to understand them, it just sort of counts for everything. Perspective is just something you need – you need to have it in order to connect with other people and to learn better and just to be able to explore your surroundings – that and curiosity.

Ariana’s comments describe a way that students experienced a connection among multiple perspectives, compassion, and inquiry. Being able to see things in different ways, she argues, is a disposition, a habit of mind, but moreover a practice that carries into other contexts. It is a way of learning to be in the world. Students like Ariana believed that multiple perspectives and curiosity are not only beneficial, they are needed, fundamental to connect with other human beings. Each time I read these remarks, I experience and re-experience my own shock of awareness. Not because her remarks are surprising, but because each time I read them, I am reminded how the standard of the day is that in most classrooms multiple perspectives are not only discouraged, they are a liability. Her words concern me (encourage my own action, in fact) when I consider how something that she argues “you just need – you need to have it in order to be able to connect with other people,” could be as absent as it is in dominant discourses on teaching.

The student talk about compassion as a mode of inquiry, reminds me of Anzaldúa’s call for a massive uprooting of dualistic thinking of the mind and the body,
two sides of an argument, the intellect and compassion, the academic and the motivational. In the student talk in these excerpts, art seems to provide one way to engage compassion as a mode of inquiry. Although Royster (2000) documents a legacy of African American scholars who drew from intellect and passion for ethical action (p. 87), these practices are less commonly found in high school. In these times, both inquiry and compassion are against the grain; The Dali Lama has even called compassion “the radicalism of our time.” As such, the practice of compassion as a mode of critical inquiry is a form of action. Here, compassion is connected to curiosity and to opening to multiple perspectives through art and dialogue. As students saw their own and the lives of others as works of art, and as they engaged in art as a theoretical instrument, they gained ongoing opportunities to recalibrate the inner and outer selves as a way to promote mindfulness, awareness, and compassion as part of an intellectual project.

**Bearing Witness Through Art as Action**

Art was positioned as action in different ways throughout the curriculum. For instance, in the ninth grade students took up a unit called Bearing Witness, a unit that had both an element of shared texts and inquiries, as well as opportunities for students to take up their own work around topics of interest to them. Throughout the unit, as students explored what it meant to bear witness, they did so with particular attention to the aesthetic features of bearing witness. They reflected upon, talked about, wrote about and made art in ways that paid attention to how a work of art can bear witness to a knowledge, history, and/or power by inscribing it in an art form. In the spring, students read Elie Weisel’s *Night*. Among a set of poems about the Holocaust, students shared and repeated Elie Weisel’s poem, “Never Shall I Forget” as a rationale for bearing
witness to the holocaust through art. In addition, they visited the Holocaust Museum in Washington DC to bear witness in different embodied ways through various exhibits. Upon returning to school after the visit, Elle asked students to share things “that they would never forget”: the enormous pile of shoes and the smell of them, the laughter of children playing while walking through an exhibit, the video of people’s bodies, a film about anti-Semitism, the words: *if you cry you die*, the sign: *work will set you free*. Reflecting upon what they saw, smelled, touched, and heard, students recognized and acknowledged the depth and range of “bearing witness” that can come from engaging the body through various sensory experiences and modalities.

To culminate the unit, students were asked to create their own Bearing Witness piece. Elle invited them to create an original arts piece to communicate a social justice message about an issue of their choosing. In class, Elle showed examples of ways to bear witness through a range of artwork and media. Students studied ways to communicate their idea to an audience through persuasive appeals of ethos, pathos and logos. The range of students’ topics and arts pieces included a painting about equality for gay teen youth, song lyrics about child abuse, a video about domestic violence, and a vocal performance about children’s rights.

**Erin: From Anime Artist to Cultural Critic**

Erin opted to create an arts piece that focused on representation of women in anime and submitted an accompanying essay. Erin, a visual arts major, was an anime enthusiast. Most days, she doodled her way through class, contributing but always with a pencil in hand. When I asked Erin during the planning process what her project would be

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16 Including an essay by Langston Hughes, “Salvation” and the song “We Shall Rise” by Mattafix.
about, she responded by both critiquing and defending the anime genre and communicating her mixed feelings about it:

I’m interested in sexism in anime, manga, and video games. There’s been some complaining that the main character is too ugly. You know, these traits that bring women down in society. It’s hard to write a female character. It’s really rare to see a capable female that you understand in anime. It’s hard to express your opinion about it, truthfully. You have to make your point clear, but I’m a writer too, so I know how to do this.

When Erin says it is hard to express your opinion about it, she refers to something she and I talked about during the process of doing this project. The project was somewhat painful for Erin to engage because she was such a devotee of anime. “I can rant about how I hate it,” she said, “but I can also rant about how I love it. The good stories, the goods characters.” For Erin to choose this project for “bearing witness” was both a risk and a generative site of inquiry as she moved into the doubt rather than away from it.

While Erin recognizes problematic traits that “bring women down” she also expresses some uncertainty about the writing of alternative scripts. Erin drew on her identities as a young woman and as an artist and anime fan as resources for her work, identities that were co-generative but also at times in tension with one another as above. Reflecting on the project, Erin wrote: “As a fan of all types of media, I am a first class example of how the media affects me as a woman and because of this, I was able to give examples.”

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17 Anime is a Japanese abbreviated pronunciation of animation that refers to a style of animation that originated in Japan in the 1960s and gained world-wide popularity outside of Japan from the 1980s onward. Anime is used in television series, films, video games, and fiction. Most anime are intended not for children, but older audiences, and anime has gained popularity in American youth culture. Sekriei is one example of an anime program that informed Kelly’s interest in this project.

18 Manga is the Japanese word for cartoon. Manga is a print medium of cartoon that is widely read by all ages in Japan. And gained popularity among youth culture in the 1990s. One of the first manga translated into English and marketed in the U.S. was Keiji Nakazawa’s Barefoot Gen, an autobiographical story of the atomic bombing of Hiroshima
an artist,” she wrote, “I know what grabs people’s attention, and I believe I was able to convey the true different worlds between the real world and the media.”

Her art piece shows this depiction with two women in police uniform. The woman on the left, tagged as “real world” is suited, her hair is tied and her gaze seems to directed toward an object we do not see. Her hand is on her hip and her sleeves are rolled up in a capable stance. The woman on the right has exaggerated features and revealing clothes. Her head is tilted down and her gaze upward, her hands coyly behind her back. That Erin described the person on the left as “real world” suggests that women are more like this woman; for Erin, this depiction says that the problem is the representation, that the media, does not show it “real.” In this way, she inscribes this woman on the left as agentive and capable, despite media depiction otherwise.

The essay below was written to accompany Erin’s art piece. In it, she describes, from an insider’s view, the problems she sees with the depiction of women in anime. Most importantly, she troubles the notion of entertainment and the hidden assumptions that art that is meant to entertain can teach. Although anime is largely seen as entertainment, Erin argues, it is replete with attitudes toward women “that bring women down.” I have excerpted the essay here because it was too long to include in its entirety, in order to show Erin’s critique of anime:
Anime and videogames are often seen as a form of entertainment. It is a way for people to relax and enjoy a story and the characters, but is it influencing the stereotypes of women in society? Anime is a popular form of animation that originates in Japan, featuring a wide variety of influences and genres and is also worldwide. Sadly like most media, anime can contain unavoidable gender roles that our society can place on women. Highly exaggerated bodies, like abnormally large breasts in contrast to very skinny waists, is a common body type of girls in Anime to try and draw more attention towards a male audience. Their role is also not a very independent one. More often women are portrayed as housemaids, victims, or weaklings with a pretty face. A show “Naruto” is a good example of this. Most female characters in this are portrayed as weak, obsessed with a certain male character, or are always worried about their looks. Even the strongest ones are only medical nurses or are being “peeped” at often by the male cast. This show is very popular especially to younger children and boys, which sets gender roles in their minds. With this in mind, no woman can be as important or enjoyable members of a series unless their bodies are perfect and they stay away from danger.

This is also very commonly used in videogames, with women being portrayed as sexual objects and/or the ultimate goal being a damsel in distress. A good example of this is a popular video game called Silent Hill. Silent Hill is a series of horror survival games which features a small cast of females who are sadly not always given a strong role. Symbols are a big part of Silent Hill, and more than often, women stand for sexual symbols. A good example of this is a character from Silent Hill 2, Maria. Maria stood for the sexual repression the main character felt because of his dead wife. It can also be noted that Maria is killed several times throughout the game because the main protagonist James was not there to save her. Also the reward for beating one of the games several times is an unlockable for a revealing outfit (with breast enhancements) for the only two female characters in that game.

Erin’s essay goes on to describe how, after the reviewers of another game, ‘Portal’ described the main character as ‘not pretty enough,’ the character’s face was drastically altered and ‘enhanced’ in the sequel to accommodate the desires of the players. “They gave into what society wants and only added another pretty face to this growing injustice,” Erin wrote. As an aspiring anime artist, Erin cautioned, “This is affecting our artists of the next generation because of the gender roles. They internalized this because of what they thought was entertainment.” For Elle and me, who had watched Erin

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19 Unlock is video game terminology for figuring out how to enable certain effects in a game or character.
grapple with the idea that entertainment might do more work upon its audience than simply entertain (earlier in the year, Erin had firmly resisted the notion that Disney could teach anything because it was just meant to be enjoyable and fun.\footnote{See chapter six for example of Kelly’s resistance.}), this was a remarkable line of inquiry. Taking the idea of “it’s just entertainment,” to something near and dear to her heart – *her* entertainment, *her* passion, what keeps *her* going – Erin was able to see that she could still work within something and against it. She could “bear witness” to an aspect of something that she saw as wrong, in something that she loved. Elle’s comments served to extend the reach of Erin’s work. Encouraging Erin to keep herself in this issue as an insider, as someone who draws and buys and watches anime, Elle wrote on Erin’s paper, under the line, “they gave into what society wants and only added another pretty face to this growing injustice,” “Who gave in?” followed by “When you become a pro anime artist, will you give in too?” Under the comment “Young artists have internalized this” Elle wrote, “Have you internalized this?”

Hesford (1999) argues that bearing witness is “not a passive act but one with interventionist implications. Bearing witness, like giving testimony is a form of action.” (xxx). She argues that *not* pursuing transformative practice risks re-creating silences. When students like Erin choose to make art that bears witness, they choose not to recreate the silences in their lives. Erin was in and of the anime community; she drew anime, watched anime, played anime games. It is quite possible that Erin will pursue a career in anime or some other style of animation. Her choice to speak out in opposition to an aspect of a genre and a community that she was very much a part of, served to make this issue public to a young audience by one of their own, and by someone with credibility to
speak on the topic. It also served to influence the shape her work in animation going forward. Erin’s drawings, prior to embarking on this assignment were very much in and of the genre – highly sexualized women with exaggerated features. Although she often had them actively doing things, the images of women were very stereotypical. This sketch shows a shift in her thinking and experimentation in representation; her female character appears dressed in a suit, her body features are not exaggerated or emphasized, and she is glancing knowingly from under the rim of a large hat. She stands side by side what appears to be a male character. Acting upon her own discoveries and interventions, Erin actively resists the conventions of the genre and re-inscribes them along what she feels to be more just lines.

Students as Researchers and Activists

Students in the tenth grade, after reading *The Laramie Project*, were asked to create their own play script on a social issue of their choice as part of a unit called “The City Project.” Students were invited to select an issue from their local community and conduct arts-based research as a form of activism around that issue. *The Laramie Project* is an artfully constructed, polyvocal juxtaposition of the voices of the people of Laramie, Wyoming in response to the murder of gay teen Matthew Shepard. Taking inspiration from the genre of *The Laramie Project*, students were asked to work collectively in small groups, conduct interviews with people in their communities on their chosen topic, and
write a play juxtaposing text from those interviews. The range of topics included teen
pregnancy, child abuse, bullying, school budget cuts, and homelessness.

A Polyvocal Script on Homelessness

Five students worked on a project about homelessness and interviewed students in
the school to compile their script. The script begins by juxtaposing six students’
perspectives and in the section that follows, the script juxtaposes interviewees’ ideas
about where the responsibility for homelessness lies. In addition to the juxtaposition of
voices, the authors play with the conventions of film scripts to convey a range of ways of
talking about homelessness:

Scene 1:
(Blackout. We hear a voice over from backstage, overlapping begins creating
somewhat of a foreshadowing effect.)

**Cindy Oswald:** It’s the economy’s fault… *(Overlapping)*

**Olia Simeon:** Yes, yes, it’s their fault… *(Overlapping)*

**Charles Johnson:** I think they should have put in more effort… *(Overlapping)*

**Haley Stewart:** It is under no circumstances their fault… *(Overlapping)*

*(Overlapping continues for some time and then silences. Lights slowly come on
Haley Stewart)*

**Haley Stewart:** Yeah, I know, I heard they passed this bill pretty much banning
homelessness. The congress is trying to stop people from bringing down
sandwiches and food and they’re not allowing homeless people to sleep on the
streets. I think it’s incredibly stupid. If you want homelessness to go away, it’s not
by force. In my opinion it is even more detrimental to the failing economy… they
want homeless people to live in shelters. But do you know how expensive it is to
build shelters? And, I’m tired of people acting like it is their fault that they are on
the streets. It is under no circumstances their fault.

**Olia Simeon:** Yes, it is their fault, because most of the homeless people are
capable of work or finding a way to earn money.

**Jamie Barton:** But, I mean things just come up. I feel bad for the people that
have to deal with being homeless.

**Sasha Gomez:** I don’t think it’s technically their fault, you know, stuff happens
and you can’t really predict the future, so you can’t blame everybody for
everything.

**Olia Simeon:** Like, they can ask for jobs and there are shelters too where they
offer help to them and find them jobs so they can survive. And there are many,
many ways in this country that people can find help so there is no need to be
homeless and like beggars who like to be there because they just get more by
asking than by working for someone else. They choose to live that way.
(overlapping once again and everyone says the last lines of their monologues)

**Olia Simeon:** They choose to live that way.
**Sasha Gomez:** You can’t blame everybody for everything.
**Haley Stewart:** It is under no circumstances their fault.
(Everyone repeats ‘their fault’ like an echo. Light fades to black)

The script begins in this way by addressing two central responses that the group found to
be in peoples’ reactions to homelessness, that is, that interviewees tended to express
blame for homelessness either upon the homeless persons themselves or upon unfortunate
but unforeseen life circumstances. Throughout the script, students attempt to juxtapose
these different voices in meaningful ways, to both highlight the differences in peoples’
ideas and assumptions as well as the similarities. The script itself, as this introductory
section suggests, aims to show peoples’ assumptions about homelessness as a form of
action. They try to make visible what would be absent from a report *about homelessness*,
and instead the script centers upon *peoples’ ideas about homelessness*. Working from an
assumption that peoples’ ideas inform how we act in the world, students include
references to government laws as a backstory. The front story of this script is how
homelessness and homeless people are talked about. For instance, in later sections of the
script, students include a range of slang words that interviewees used to refer to homeless
people and juxtapose those words for effect. They include one homeless person’s voice
to describe some of the practical obstacles one person faced in getting by homeless.

From a homeless person, Haley (who works at a shelter) included “instructions on how to
survive being homeless”:

> First ya gotta get a library card. If ya have that you can hang out at the library all
day. Then ya need a public pool card so you can use the showers. And maybe
everything else you need is some headphones. You don’t need an IPod or an mp3
player, just headphones so you can look like you’re listening to music while you’re reading that book. So you’re not just part of the DC scenery. So you can look normal. Just like everyone else.

Including the voice of a homeless person, the students tried to have a homeless person speak with and alongside the people talking about homelessness. This form of arts-based research, required that students find ways of representing a range of perspectives without reaching consensus. Through the form of the script, students played with the conventions of theater, such as the overlapping voice and the lighting cues, to add weight to the words. The overlapping voices exaggerated and drew attention to the range of voices interfering with one another. Moments of silence and changes in the lighting added dramatic effect after repeated lines to create moments of pause. Despite including a range of voices, the group wrote the play to draw awareness to homelessness, to advocate for homeless people. Their work sought to draw attention to the ways that homelessness is talked about, and to create an arts piece that made those differences visible. This arts-based research drew upon story as a way of knowing and generating knowledge about an issue or idea. The art form sought to potentially engage listeners/viewers in the issue of homelessness through the script’s aesthetic appeal. It sought to humanize homelessness and generate an ethical concern through art. The art served as a platform for collective critical inquiry and advocacy.

As I have tried to make clear, students did a range of writing in English class, and although I have foregrounded their arts-based work, they also wrote essays and constructed more traditional forms of argument. The essays provided space for students to think in different ways about the work they were doing. In response to the Laramie Project, for example, students were asked to write an essay about the purposes of
engaging in doing research differently. They were asked to think about the value of writing a polyvocal film script as arts-based research and to think about the kinds of knowledge it generated. Nora asked students to respond, in essay form, to the following questions:

Father R. Schmidt said it was the responsibility of the theater company to “say it correct.” Did The Laramie Project say it correct? Did it provide a fair and accurate portrayal of Laramie? What do you see as the purpose of writing and performing this play? What impact do you think it will have on the world?

Thinking about whether the Laramie Project “said it correct,” was a way for students to join Moisés Kauffman as an artist and to think about the goals and purposes of different forms of artistry. In relation to both The Laramie Project and to creating their City Projects, students were required to negotiate this question as both a reader/viewer and an artist. To think about what it meant to “say it correct,” required students to problematize the idea of what it means to get a story right. These comments are taken from students’ essays:

**Meika:** I believe The Laramie Project did say it correct, because instead of using one voice such as media, it used peoples’ actual words and from all points of view to tell the story in the most un-biased way there is, including the accused and guilty side.

**Tanesha:** At the end of the day, I think that The Laramie Project did say it correct because the interviews were real, and the whole time my class was reading it, and we got different people to play the roles of the interviewees, the harsh words that people said sounded so hurtful and effective in a bad way, and it kind of made me think more. Plus, this is deep and serious because a person is gone.

This, in turn, informed how students might aspire to tell their stories along similar standards for representation of a range of perspectives and ways of thinking about their issue. To ‘say it correct’ meant finding a way to convey the issue of their choosing in
ways that attempted to go beyond one-sided, or even two-sided debates to create more accurate, nuanced representations of complex social problems. Nora asked:

So why do we write a play? What impact do you think it can have? What is the power of performance? Why do we invite people to come? What is the purpose of that in community? We could have looked up this topic online and it would have taken five minutes! Why read and write a play?

These responses are taken from students’ writing:

**Aurora:** The style that the theater company decided to write the play helped, you saw what happened in your head from multiple people in the interviews. You got a wide range of ideas that helped tell the story.

**Max:** I think the purpose of writing/performing this play is to capture the peoples’ attention to the issue of hate crimes. To address the issue and make it known that peoples’ actions come with a consequence, an effect.

**Eliza:** The purpose of the play was to get the real story of Laramie and not the media show. To get the story from the people and the impact it had on them.

**Ariana:** I found some of the things people said were interesting. Things such as “we’re the product of our society” and “do you realize this (homophobic slurs) is violence? That this is the seed of violence?” The things said in the play are interesting and debatable. Like a lot of things, it will bring about more debate and conflict. More interest about the subject of homosexuality and gayness arises.

Each of these purposes – to capture people’s attention, to get the real story and to consider ideas that were “debatable,” are all purposes that position the art form as a form of collective action. Each argues that the purpose of writing the play in this way was to have an effect beyond the work itself, and to promote dialogue around a range of ideas.

Tanesha argues that a purpose of writing and performing the play in this way, through multiple voices of participants, is a way of breaking silence around violence.

**Tanesha:** In my opinion, the purpose of performing and writing this play was to show how even though you live in the same place as other people, you can have a different perspective or lifestyle. At first, people were acting as if Laramie was a happy place, until we met some characters who were very religious and disagreed with homosexuals. The majority of the interviewees said it was the suspect’s fault
and some said it was 50/50. This play will have a big impact among the people of
this world because, to me, people say stuff and do violent things to other people
who are different or homosexual, but at the end of the day they don’t really
discuss it and go deep into thought about the whole situation.

Tanesha described the play as a way of uncovering complex and hidden ideologies in
community. Despite the way the town was described as a happy place, Tanesha was
surprised that so that many of the interviewees blamed the suspect. She describes the
play as having a “big impact” because it served as a way of “going deeper into thought”
and finding ways to talk about things we don’t otherwise discuss. Meika spoke
specifically to the medium of theater as an art form that invites the reader in, and allows
them to draw their own conclusions:

**Meika:** The theater medium was especially successful because theater is such a
powerful art form where the audience gets transported to another world for a
while and learns the story for themselves and to make their own conclusions. The
impact on the world would be a message to everyone about stopping the hate for
gruesome crimes like “The Laramie Project” and a message of hope considering
something good came out of it, to spread the message about peace and universal
acceptance.

While Meika speaks to the unique power and potential in theater as an art form that can
transport the audience and allow that person to draw his/her own conclusions, she also
suggests that this does not mean the project was unbiased. She suggests that the purpose
of this play was to serve a transformative role; she saw it as a form of action, to draw
attention to and promote awareness and acceptance.

**Conclusion**

There is no easy formula for the relationship between art and action. But the
students’ work in Nora and Elle’s classes suggest the potential for arts-based literacy in
working toward collective action. Art means “to put together, to join” (OED, [1993]
p.3264) and when art is positioned in particular ways in the curriculum, it seems to have the capacity to draw diverse people together, to promote dialogue, and a course of action. Student work in multivocality, compassion as a mode of critical inquiry, bearing witness, and arts-based research, gesture toward a collective role of art and provide images of community-in-the-making. Dewey (1934) argued that “works of art are the most intimate and energetic means of aiding individuals to share in the arts of living” (p.336). Art helped students to develop intimate and energetic mindful practice and awareness, to cultivate an inner self that could be in conversation with others and the world.

In this way, arts-based literacy provided a platform for a happier, healthier, gentler way of doing school and of engaging in critical literacy, of contemplating and engaging in action. Students and teachers saw their work as collective action through pedagogy that sought both joy and justice (Christensen, 2009), both heart and mind work. As tenth grade student Katherine said, art is “a powerful tool to change the world and express our opinions without being forceful.” It encouraged students to be peaceful warriors, to act in the world through art and the ongoing project of learning to talk to one another across difference. Students could engage, like Erin, in what they loved, and work to change something. Art and adolescents were positioned as an especially electric pairing. Students like Ariana spoke to the energy that adolescents have to become powerful agents in “the ways things move”:

I think young people are a type of movement. They have a strong push in the way things move. They have strong opinions and they can move people older, or children younger. Their ideas can be those of others who may not have the mental strength or any sort of leadership. The young person alone is pretty amazing, but in a group they can accomplish anything.
Arts-based literacy provided a space for students to explore, to challenge, and to re-inscribe what was handed to them. Whether it was manga, homelessness, or homophobia, students used art to question, to develop individual and collective beliefs, and to act upon those beliefs through their interactions with others and through making and engaging art.

However, ultimately the work of teachers and students toward collective action was not located in activities, or units, or discrete habits of mind or even dispositions. It was in their practice. Practice is enacted, cultivated and always in-the-making. We often think of teaching as a practice, we might think of yogic practice, or living mindfully is a practice. We rarely think of high school students engaged in practice. But students engaged in a practice that relied on theorizing and mindful action and reflection on the world in order to change it. And this practice was catalyzed, deepened, and sustained through art. If aesthetics recognizes and encourages a permeability of the boundaries between ourselves and others, aesthetic practice was an action that worked toward permeating these boundaries. It was an action of learning to be in the world relationally and was enacted as part of the everyday lived experience of students in their English classes through arts-based literacy.
Chapter VII

Conclusion & Implications: Arts-Based Literacy as Aesthetic Practice for 21st Century Learning

Introduction

This work explores what arts-based literacy learning can mean when taken up by students and teachers in the day-to-day work of their classrooms over time. I set out to explore and theorize what arts-based literacy from a socio-critical perspective might mean in everyday practice in high school. I began this study with the research question: How are teachers and students making sense of their engagement with arts-based literacy? I take seriously the complexity of this project, which has required that I dance between arts and literacy theory and research, each in itself, large and complex, trying to situate this work at the intersections of aesthetic and critical approaches. These domains are vast, and to make sense of them in this space has been humbling, and at times, unwieldy. Throughout the study, I have attempted to provide images of, theorize, and define, what arts-based literacy meant to the people who practiced it, and at the same time, make sense of this work within and against existing theory, research, and policy.
My sense-making led me to theorize and understand this work at the intersections of critical literacy and aesthetic education. Taking a sociocultural perspective has kept this work messy, and has required an ongoing commitment to attempting to make sense of my questions as living questions, amidst the complexity of teaching and research with and among students and their teachers. In the first half of this final chapter, I summarize my research findings. In the second half of the chapter, I consider implications for theory and practice, and for further research.

**Statement of Findings**

At the end of chapter six, I introduced the idea that students developed an aesthetic practice through their engagement with art and literacy. Across the two classes, and over time, aesthetic practice became a way of understanding what it meant to engage in arts-based literacy. In the following section, I will reflect upon the three data chapters as dimensions of this aesthetic practice.

**Art as a Story, Lives as Works of Art**

From the beginning, it was clear that in these classrooms, art occupied a central position in curriculum and pedagogy, and that the configuration for arts-based learning here, meant starting with art. Rather than supplementing with art, integrating art into the curriculum, or extending the curriculum through art, art was positioned as central to classroom work on a daily basis. Art was also broadly defined. In keeping with expanded definitions of art associated with the visual turn (Mitchell, 1995), art included fine arts as well as a range of media and literature. The inclusion was broad and eclectic and incorporated, but was not limited to, the art and media from students’ lives. Rock music, rap, and anime were texts that took a position in the curriculum alongside
photography, painting, and dance. In these English classes, the focus of these texts, were the stories they told. In this way, and from the beginning, art provided a new way for students to conceptualize text to include multiple forms of representation and multiple modalities. Positioning art as story, and story in many forms as art, opened up new ways of sense-making where language was placed at the center of artistic activity. Art as text brought a range of forms of representation and modalities to study as texts in English class, and text as art brought aesthetic ways of looking to a range of forms of representation and modalities.

This positioning is very different from narrow definitions of text as written canonical texts, and narrow ways of reading text as technical extraction of meaning. By positioning art as story, teachers and students made links between different kinds of reading and different kinds of texts. Importantly, through art, students like Seneca came to see text as central and important to their lives, both in and out of school. They learned to see stories everywhere. Through art, these adolescents began to see a blurring of the artificial boundaries that their prior schooling had generally constructed around literacy as a school practice, and a range of art that was seen as pleasure and therefore not school material. Seeing art as story, opened up ways for these adolescents to see connections between art and literacy in and out of school, connections that made school learning more relevant to their lives. Students, from the start, paid attention to aesthetic features of text that aimed to sharpen sensory and perceptual responses. In other words, texts began to be seen as embodied.

These new ways of looking at art and text shifted students’ learned ways of seeing text as autonomous and fixed. Positioning art as story, foregrounded how meaning is
represented, constructed, interpreted, and shared. When students explored their own lives as works of art, they brought these ways of thinking to themselves. They came to see art as a way of making sense of their lived experience, who they were, had been, and wished to become. Seeing their lives as works of art, meant developing agentive identities as they saw their lives, through the eyes of art, as open to construction and revision. The open structure of art provided a way for students to recognize multiple subjectivities, a way for them to recognize that these multiple subjectivities did not need to conform to a singular voice. Art made space for students to construct themselves in many different ways. Through art, tensions and contradictions could co-exist and be seen not as problems to be solved. Art provided a way for student to see that their identities were not fixed, that there is no such thing as a unitary self, as the Buddhist tradition would describe it, the self is empty of self-nature. Seeing themselves in these ways made self-change possible; it helped students to see their lives as perpetually to-be-written and in this way, helped them to cultivate an anti-deterministic stance.

Expanded notions of text made diversity visible in the classroom. Students could both learn about themselves and learn about others, amidst an environment where most work was shared. More ways of knowing and more way of telling provided more ways of accessing one another’s stories. As schools struggle to diversify curriculum to meet the needs of a diverse student body, art provided a way for students to see themselves both as individuals and as part of a community. They were encouraged to trust their ideas, as students put it, to “have opinions and express them,” “not be afraid to say things,” “to use my mind the way I want to,” and to “tell a story to make you strong.” This was done in ways that made them answerable to each other. As Melinda said, we
learn to “find ourselves within finding other people.” Art and story provided ways for students to see both what they shared and how they were unique, and to engage in ongoing identity work in relation to others. Their work within this hermeneutic circle of conversation among a diverse group of people, meant that meaning and selfhood was always evolving in the light of new relationships and new horizons.

Through this work in constructing their lives as works of art, risk-taking and identity exploration, important aspects of adolescent development were invited into the classroom and mined and nurtured there. These aspects of adolescent development were not seen as distracting or deterrent to learning in school, but positioned within “academic work.” To the extent that this work was responsive and relevant to adolescents’ developmental needs and desires, learning was made meaningful to students’ lives. Their work in school could both serve as a site of learning skills and of doing so amidst identity work, relational work, and the kinds of risk-taking that are involved in cultivating agency in a social context.

As agentive identity work, this work further served as an opportunity for students to locate themselves in the work of school. It helped them to become better students of their own education by staking out who they were, who wanted to become, and how school could help them with that. This work was intentionally designed by both teachers in different ways that each fall under the umbrella of what Nora described as “an inquiry into their own education.”

I came to regard this kind of seeing through the eyes of art as story as the first dimension of arts-based literacy as an aesthetic practice. Students developed the practice of seeing art as story, and their lives as a work of art. It was a quiet practice, not
described as such, but it was ongoing, and recursive, and learned by doing. Although students did learn along the way what are largely considered skills (figurative language, the conventions of genre, and literary motifs, etc), what seemed most meaningful to students, was a new way of thinking about text, about art, and about their lives. It was a new way of doing school. This new way of seeing text through the eyes of art would help them in the ongoing project of finding meaning in the work of school and the ongoing project of situating themselves within a diverse community.

**Art as a Theoretical Instrument**

Art as a theoretical instrument positioned adolescents as knowledge generators rather than passive receivers. Reflective thought requires a degree of detachment from a problem in lived experience in order to analyze and theorize it. Art provided this detachment. Using art as a theoretical instrument drew upon adolescents’ natural capacity to make sense of the world around them, test ideas, and generate theories about how to live. It encouraged innovation and the social imagination. When students used art as a theoretical instrument, they developed a way of approaching text with curiosity and with an assumption that they could use art to make sense of their lived experience. Students extended upon their work with their lives as works of art so that their theoretical thinking could be applied to art as everyday experience.

Arts-based literacy provided opportunities for students to reclaim their imaginations. When they used art as a theoretical instrument rather than an object to be known, this process encouraged an inquiry stance. Students developed a comfort in uncertainty and in recognizing, learning from, and questioning the theories of others. With inquiry and imagination, students engaged in a more hopeful curriculum, as
Vanessa put it, “to use the imagination to always be able to envision something better.” In this way, it was a forward-thinking way of engaging with school, and art, and text. It required, as Lys said, “opening your mind to see things in ways you wouldn’t have,” and to develop a sort of humility, a comfort in uncertainty of not knowing all there is to know about something.

Art as a theoretical instrument not only encompassed multiple perspectives and ways of looking, but it saw these multiple ways as generative sites of learning from each other. As schools look to find ways of making the classroom more welcoming and meaningful places to a diverse student body, arts-based literacy relied upon multiple perspectives and multiple voices. hooks (1995) argues that there are two competing visions of art in these times. The first, one that undermines aesthetic freedom, she argues, is one where the cultural marketplace and competition is mirrored by art. The second is a vision where diverse standpoints, perspectives, and locations are nurtured and find support (p. 139). Engaging with art as a theoretical instrument opened up the classroom space to multiple voices, it made abstract generalizations problematic; by nature of encouraging multi-voiced theories, art subverted dualism and reductionism. It translated fixed notions of reality to a web of reality, and students’ theorizing helped them to both make sense of the various perspectives in that web, and in the process, their own location.

These multi-perspectival and theoretical ways of looking became another important dimension of an aesthetic practice. Students learned to approach a range of texts through multiple lenses in order to see what was not readily apparent. They began to see that perception is connected to ways of looking, and that their ways of looking
could be revised, extended, and deepened through the process of looking and theorizing with others. To perceive better meant to take notice of other ways of looking, as Isabelle said, to “look at things in different ways” in order to “see things in new ways” (emphasis added). Melinda said, “it’s giving me knowledge and perspectives.” The people in the room, and their perceptions, were an active part of the curriculum. Also, a focus on perception shifted school learning to a meaning-making endeavor that required mindful attention. Dewey (1958) said that “what is perceived are meanings rather than just events or existences” (p.248 as cited in Jackson, p. 7). Meanings were not to be found or identified as predetermined, but to be explored. Since there is always more to see, or hear, or notice, or think about, perception made meaning-making an ongoing and enacted process, and school the process of learning among others the practice of how to do that better. Drawing on adolescence as a time of theoretical thinking and upon their desire to know why things are the way they are, art as a theoretical instrument made this work the project of school learning.

**Art as Collective Action**

Collective action through arts-based literacy foregrounded dialogue and critique. It was enabled and extended by students’ work with their lives as works of art and with art as a theoretical instrument. In the process of becoming more aware and awake to their own lives and to the world, students developed a mindful practice with one another; arts-based learning cultivated an opening to both ideas and to each other. As a place for mapping diverse experiences, art opened students’ hearts and minds to each other’s lived worlds and served as a site of dialogue across difference. “Trying to understand how other people think,” as Mark described it, was a heart-mind endeavor. It encouraged
compassion as a mode of critical inquiry that generated collective capacity and a
permeability of the boundaries between the self and others. This was not always engaged
with easy optimism. Natasha described the challenges of arts-based literacy work:

Well… it’s hard to open your mind sometimes. There are some people here
that annoy me to no return. But, when you’re mixed in with a group of people
in any school, you’re gonna get that… you’re gonna have to deal with them
just the same.

“Having to deal” is an act of compassion, maybe the hardest kind. This was indeed part
of their practice. As work in relational space, arts-based literacy drew upon and mined
adolescent development as relational and as co-constructed. Students learned with and
from one another in ways that helped them to work in solidarity toward collective action.

Collective action served as the third dimension of aesthetic practice. Arts-based
approaches actively cultivated community in the classroom. Community-building was
not an add-on to the curriculum or a program, nor was it expected as classroom norm; it
was built actively by students and teachers through carefully designed pedagogy over
time. As students began to see their lives as works of art, and used art to inquire into and
theorize the world, students developed ways of being in the classroom and ways of being
in the world relationally. Aesthetic practice helped them to work in both personal and
public realms, to find ways to talk across difference, and to discover and build shared
interests and concerns.

**Arts-Based Literacy as Aesthetic Practice**

Inspired, in part, by O’Reilley (1993), this study has been one attempt to build a
pedagogical framework for “living in the house of art.” I came to this work interested in
art as epistemology. Given that art is so rarely viewed as a way of knowing for older
students, I was thrilled to find a high school site that used art centrally in curriculum and pedagogy. Over time, I came to see that the work of students and teachers in these English classes, while rooted in art as epistemology, was a way of living the arts and literacy; it was *a way of knowing*, but also became *a way of being* and *a way of doing*. Throughout each of the three dimensions of aesthetic practice, arts-based literacy was meant to be experiential; it served as a way of living through the curriculum, and over time, developed discernable features of a practice. The notion of aesthetic practice seemed to convey the experiential core of the work and the way it was actively engaged over time. It was not a program, or a class, or a teacher, and not an isolated unit of study, but a pervasive way of going about the work of being, acting, and doing in school. This practice included art as a means of inquiring into and theorizing the self, the world, and each other. It included a curriculum with both joy and intellectual challenge through engagement of hearts and minds. It included individual work, relational work, and collective action.

Similarly, I altered my thinking somewhat on the concept of dispositions. I came to this study with the idea that dispositions, as an alternative framework to skills, would be a useful subject for analysis because dispositions make less of a distinction between the cognitive and the affective. But over time, the notion of practices seemed to better capture the ways that the work was engaged as experience. It was aesthetic experience to the extent that the imagination was engaged. As Dewey (1934) said, “aesthetic experience is imaginative” and “all conscious experience has some degree of imaginative quality” (p. 276). Much like the artist’s practice, yogic practice, or a teacher’s practice, students learned to act in ways through thinking and doing and through the imagination.
Aesthetic practice was a way of bringing in the world to the classroom and acting in the world from the standpoint of the classroom. Through channels of the imagination, it was an active, theorized practice. To the extent that it was in-the-making, and socially situated, the environment could be seen as its own ecology. Kemmis, Wilkinson, Hardy & Edwards Groves (2009) argue that ecologies of practice have significance because they can be sites of transformation for students. Ecologies of practice consider the dynamics of students’ changed practices rather than changed but static ‘learning outcomes.’

Ecologies of practice are open, living structures that respond and shape to students’ lives, not the other way around. Considering the dynamics of students’ changed practices is a way of thinking about how I made sense of the data in this research.

When I spoke with Nora recently about her work as cultivating an aesthetic practice, she said to me matter-of-factly, “Well, I should hope so!” To Nora, this was a given. In a larger context though, we rarely talk about high school students having a practice. Yet they do; after a decade in school, to be sure they have developed ways of going about their work as a student. They develop ways of “doing school.” The question becomes what are these ways and what are the practices we wish to cultivate? Aesthetic practice in this space, for instance, was an alternative to compliance as practice.

Aesthetic practice was embodied (not disembodied), it was moving (not static), it was invented (not transmitted), it was relational (not individual), and it was mindful and attentive (versus anaesthetic). It served to create an experience where the outcome could not be fully known. Through experience, it sought to yield multiple perspectives, it sought innovation and newness, it sought to cultivate dialogue across multiple ways of
seeing and doing. Aesthetic practice was innovative practice because it sought to see beyond what was immediately apparent. It was a practice of possibility.

Aesthetic practice accommodated and acknowledged diversity and plurality and sought to permeate boundaries between things that are different. It was a way to hold in productive tension the contradictions in human life. In particular, it held the capacity to hold oppositions in tension that are often bifurcated in school, such as the mind and the body. Art was integral in making aesthetic experience possible, but the practice, the way of acting, was markedly the focus:

Nora: It’s not just about that one art, but it’s a way of thinking, a way of approaching life, really, a way of approaching situations. And it’s giving them great practice, at like communicating and expressing who they are, and feeling confident in that, that sort of groundedness I see in most of our students here. Which, I think is kind of phenomenal (laughs) for high school, I mean I certainly didn’t feel grounded in high school.

Nor did I. Not being about one art, but a way of thinking, a way of approaching life, was the face of arts-based literacy here.

The work students were doing was the cultivation of a particular kind of practice that gained generative potential from the juxtaposition of art and literacy, but more particularly, it was the juxtaposition of the aesthetic and the critical. The pairing of the aesthetic and the critical seemed to be a central, but quiet undergirding framework for cultivating these three dimensions of arts-based literacy. Although teachers and students did not speak in these terms, they spoke to these ideas. Their work serves as a site for learning about what can happen when the aesthetic and the critical are intentionally juxtaposed in a high school classroom.
A Different Way Of Doing School

As I have suggested throughout this study, what mattered to students did not preclude the intellectual; it was simply not separated from the intellectual. Chapter six described this mind/heart work that fueled students to be intellectuals and activists. Students came to see that they could have both joy and community and a challenging intellectual environment, that these were not only not mutually exclusive, they were co-generative. Anik described the benefits this way:

I wanted to go to an arts school but I was afraid if I went to an arts school, I wouldn’t get like… the hard-core education I need…. My mom started researching this school and realized it would be good, even though it’s still an arts school and I want to be a doctor – an arts school would still benefit me.

For Anik, “hard-core education” could mean aspiring to become a doctor and learning through art. She went on to say, “I like how intense it is, and challenging, and I’d rather do something that is challenging than something that is easy.” She went on to say, “The education here is… it can be intense and sometimes you just need to stress.” Anik recognized that what she could learn from arts-based teaching would benefit her. She did not have to choose between art and science. Many students at Tobin did not intend to pursue careers in the arts. Students across the classes planned to become psychologists, forensic scientists, family lawyers, writers, graphic designers, and, doctors in addition to musicians, performers, and writers. Some described art as making their learning more rich. Natasha, who told me she selected this school “because it would be challenging academically,” had this to say:

I’m being challenged and I love it… it’s not diluted in any way from the arts … it doesn’t make it easier or harder, it just makes it more rich.
“More rich,” the way Natasha describes it, is different than enrichment. Rather, more rich is a way of making learning rich from the ground up, and for all students, all the time. Both Anik and Natasha saw their work as intellectually challenging and saw art as having “benefits” to this challenging work. Distinctions between arts and non-arts areas seemed to be abated here. Unlike traditional arts schools where students would spend a number of classes a day in an arts discipline, at Tobin students spent one period a day in their arts class. Aesthetic practice was a way of blurring the boundaries between core subject areas within an intellectually challenging environment. This was an important feature of what it meant here to be arts-based.

**Haley:** So, like my whole life I wanted to go to APFA which is like another arts school in this city… and this is kinda like more academically prosperous because like, at APFA they have like four arts classes and here they have one, which is good, because you have a lot of time for academics and stuff. They also incorporate like, your major into like projects and stuff, so like, it’s a good school, for like, that.

As a whole, students seemed to characterize arts-based literacy as “academically prosperous,” but they also seem to appreciate cross-disciplinary study that happened when core classes were arts-based.

Being “rich,” and “loving it,” and it being “academically prosperous,” seemed to make for a different way of doing school than adolescents were accustomed to. Arts-based literacy led students to re-imagine school and to find different ways of doing school in English class. The students’ voices overwhelmingly positioned their experience with arts-based literacy as another way of learning.

The positioning of art-based literacy within a climate of inquiry as described in chapter five, made the classroom a place to discover new ideas and ways of being in the
world. It also provided students opportunities to, as Ariana said, “do what we love.” However, the nature of arts-based learning did not only mean creating opportunities for students to do what they love, it also meant creating spaces for them to find what they loved. There is a way in which the exploration, experimentation, and inquiry was contagious. Justin said:

Once you actually get in the school, you actually think about other things besides your major. Like, I actually want to get into more vocals and more instrumental, from my friends, just like seeing them doing these things.

In this way, this place of discovery extended into taking risks, trying new things, and these capacities played out in the classroom as reading and taking up different texts and ideas, and finding ways of working together. In the classroom, they had opportunities to explore through many arts, not only their majors.

In a related way, arts-based learning was also a way for students to find belonging in the classroom and in their school. Nora spoke of a quiet goal being for students to find allegiances with others with whom they may not have otherwise recognized allegiances and solidarities. She also talked to me about her design to include a wide range of texts so that students could find multiple ways of belonging in a text. “I think it’s pretty natural,” she said, “that you identify with certain groups over others,” and when people can draw on personal experience, they are that much more invested.” The pedagogical design intentionally included multiple opportunities to find belonging. It provided chances to find home and belonging in a text, belonging in English class, belonging in terms of themselves, in the world, and collectively.

An important aspect of finding belonging in school, is how students position themselves in relation to the project of school. Here, through art, students found ways of
being in their work rather than outside it. Non-duality in the Buddhist tradition\textsuperscript{21} means that “the practitioner will have to contemplate body in the body, feelings in the feelings, mind in the mind, objects of mind in the objects of mind.” This means getting inside something in order to understand it. Rather than viewing their work “through a long viewing tube,” (Rich, 1993), non-duality as a practice in school meant students found ways of getting inside their work, of making it their own. Sometimes this happened through choice, sometimes it happened through doing and finding what they loved, and as a whole, it happened through aesthetic practice which sought to permeate boundaries. Although art was not a guarantee of engagement, students learned, through the eyes of art, to become more invested in school; it encouraged students to find their way into a subject of study, to engage it, and to make it their own.

Discussion

Situating the Work: What the Arts Teach Here

There is a body of work that presents compelling arguments for what the arts teach (Eisner, 2002; Hoffman, 2007). This study has been inspired by that body of work and hopes to contribute to it. At the same time, the arts-based, aesthetic practice as described here was not accidental or guaranteed by the mere existence of art in the curriculum. This research aims to contribute to situated work that explores the nature of what students learn from art under particular conditions. It stems from a belief that art has a different role to play in different disciplines and from the idea that what the arts teach necessarily depends upon how art is positioned in pedagogy. If art is not autonomous or singular, what can be learned from art is largely related to how we

\textsuperscript{21} from the Satipatthana Sutta
position art in learning and what we think it is and can do. For this reason, I make it a part of this project to consider art and arts-based literacy as both a curriculum and a pedagogy.

Important work in what students learn from art was carried out by Hetland, Winner, Veneema, and Sheridan (2007) in their book Studio Thinking. In the context of art education, these scholars argue that before we make the case for arts education, we need to find out what the arts actually teach and what art students actually learn. The context for Hetland and her colleagues’ study was arts classes that used a framework of teacher demonstration, student work and practice, followed by critique. It was from this pedagogy they argued, that students developed eight “studio habits of mind” that could potentially transfer to other contexts. From another angle, the work of my study in explores the role of art in the context of English class with different critical literacy and inquiry-based pedagogical approaches. Like Hetland and her colleagues, I was initially interested in habits of mind, or dispositions, that students cultivate through art rather than discrete skills. When I began this study, I planned to try to understand what was being learned by focusing on students, on their engagement with arts-based literacy, a plan that shifted as I became curious about the opportunities that afforded the kinds of learning that I observed. As I started to watch how students were learning, and what they were learning, I soon decided that in order to understand the nature of the learning taking place, I had to explore the nature of the teaching as well. I want to guard against making claims in this dissertation for what the arts teach, and instead try to underscore what the

22 These eight studio habits of mind are: 1) develop craft; 2) engage and persist; 3) envision; 4) express; 5) observe; 6) reflect; 7) stretch and explore; 8) understand art world.
arts teach here, under these pedagogical conditions. In order to do this, I need to say a few things about what I saw and learned about pedagogical design.

**Arts-Based Pedagogy as Design**

As I described in chapter two, in these times, much research in arts integration has involved connections between art and other subjects and much of this work, aside from public and community art, has not been situated within socio-cultural, critical practice. Habermas (1987) argued that good integrated curriculum aims at the understanding of lifeworlds. Understanding of lifeworlds means learning ways of approaching problems in and out of school. The work in Nora and Elle’s classes viewed art and non-arts disciplines as sites of critical inquiry, world reading, and as places that develop habits of being in the world relationally. It is interesting to note that the classes I observed, although I would call them *literacy* classes, in the sense that the work that they engaged was centered around the understanding of lifeworlds through art and text, were rostered as *English* classes, as was standard across the district.

Knowing something about where Nora and Elle’s ideas came from helped me to understand the ways that arts-based literacy pedagogy was designed and taken up by students. Nora was a member of the National Writing Project. She was also part of a teacher inquiry group that had been meeting regularly for several years to discuss problems of practice. Nora engaged in a considerable amount of research for each of her teaching units. I met with her the summer prior to the school year and gained insight into the kinds of work she did then to prepare for the upcoming year, selecting the texts she wanted to teach, building units around essential questions, and designing a tenth grade
World Literature class around the idea of “The Danger of a Single Story”\textsuperscript{23} Nora often
drew from work from the Southern Poverty Law Center and Teaching Tolerance. She
read literature. She drew from critical theorist Paolo Freire and social justice educator
Linda Christensen. She wrote a blog on teaching for the public school newspaper. She
sang as a high school student herself. Speaking to the important roles that inquiry and
community played in her teaching life, Nora wrote the following as part of a longer piece
that was co-written with members of her teacher inquiry group:

To me, a teacher inquiry community is a group of teachers who are willing to do the
hard work of looking closely at their practice and challenge themselves to question
the assumptions and beliefs that are guiding their motives as teachers. A teacher
inquiry community is about growth and dialogue: only by engaging with others can I
disrupt the journey and grow and learn from it. What is so powerful and unique about
this particular inquiry community, Struggles and Strategies, is that we each come
from very distinct school contexts and yet we are able to speak directly to a common
experience, inspire one another and challenge each other’s thinking. I trust and
respect the other participants and I always leave thinking about my practice deeply.

For Nora, “the hard work of looking closely” at practice was an ongoing project, not
something she did exclusively at the teacher inquiry group meetings. Rather, she
embodied this work in the day-to-day work of teaching, reflecting with me at the end of a
day’s lesson, at the end of a unit, and in our conversations before the school year began.

\textsuperscript{23} http://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story.html
Elle was also a member of the National Writing Project. In college, Elle had started a women’s reading group where they read bell hooks and Paolo Freire. Like Nora, Elle did a considerable amount of research to build curriculum. Elle drew from media studies, news, visual art, and music, as sources of inspiration for her work in the classroom, and integrated popular media in ongoing ways. She had been involved with theater as an adolescent. She liked to draw and she was learning, alongside students, to play the guitar. The PowerPoint images here are two examples of the kinds of original slides that Elle designed and used every day for teaching.  

The first one, focusing on the aesthetic features of two Bob Dylan album covers from the 1960s, was paired with the Joyce Carol Oats short story, “Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?” set in the same time period. The second image shows the way that Elle built curriculum from the texts in students’ lives. Here, she introduces the “My Name Is” writing assignment by

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24 This example of one of many slides for this given day. Lorraine loved creating them, and created upwards of a dozen or more of these for some classes.
juxtaposing rapper Eminem’s song, *My Name Is* with Cisneros’ text, *The House on Mango Street*. In each case, the slides served as part of a larger text set to be drawn upon for sense-making, and to build connections between and among texts and students’ lives.

Both Nora and Elle were highly reflexive and reflective teachers. bell hooks (p.15) has said that in order to empower students, teachers must do their own ongoing work in self-actualization. Nora and Elle had a range of ways of engaging in this work both individually and collectively. They saw their work as very much in-the-making and both teachers adopted an inquiry stance on practice, which I could see in the ways that they planned, where their ideas came from, and how they talked to me about their work. Both Nora and Elle had a social justice agenda. They designed instruction to teach skills embedded in the larger project of working collectively toward a more just society. Although I focus on critical pedagogy and art, and although they had some freedom to design their own curriculum, they were still responsible for submitting lesson plans organized around core standards. Some days students did do vocabulary tests, answer comprehension questions, and practice for state tests. This work was not the focus of this study but it is important to recognize that the work was designed around standards and not working outside of them.

Although Nora and Elle both invented arts-based literacy pedagogy in their classrooms, each of them came to this work in their own way. Their approaches speak to the ways that, given some similar critical goals, there is not one way to engage in the work of arts-based literacy. The three dimensions that I describe and analyze in the data chapters, however, are dimensions common across the differences in the two classes. I chose to focus on these shared dimensions that cut across the differences so that I could
speak in some meaningful way about what arts-based literacy meant here and how arts-based literacy as a pedagogical framework might be conceptualized. I came to see their differences in approach as powerful, agentive, ways of making it their own, not as drawbacks: Nora’s class tended to draw more heavily from print text; Elle’s tended to draw more heavily from media. Lorraine identified more as an artist. Molly described herself as “not an artist” but nonetheless had been engaged for years with work in opening up what counts as text in a literacy classroom.

This doesn’t necessarily come naturally to me – in planning to always incorporate visual literacies and different kinds at the forefront. But that is really where I am trying to go because I really see the benefit of that for students here and elsewhere.

One way of looking at Nora’s comment is that one does not need to be an artist in the conventional sense to engage this work, to engage in artful pedagogical design. The students seemed to recognize and appreciate their teachers’ risk-taking and support of their work in different arts. Haley, in an interview, told me this:

The teachers are good here. Even if some of them are not artistic… I think they are all really supportive of what we want to do… and they’re not like, ‘I really don’t understand art, so I’m not going to give them multimodal projects.’

Haley speaks to the inquiry stance that teachers took toward art and the practice of arts-based literacy pedagogy. In relation to *The Laramie Project* unit, Nora spoke again to a different kind of risk that further demonstrated her inquiry stance as a teacher. She talked with me about the risk involved in teaching a play like *The Laramie Project* and spoke about her approach to a text about homophobia and hate crimes with students:

This happens to be something I am particularly comfortable with which helps, but …part of the fear is that you have to be open with the fact that you yourself have fear about teaching a subject or talking about this subject, and that goes with anything. So, that is really important… not like you have this all figured out.
This orientation was particularly important because it demonstrated a practice of the kind of inquiry she expected of her students. The aesthetic practice, in other words, was shared by teachers and students and not something taught to students.

Building curriculum around what students wanted and needed was extremely important to both teachers. Elle told me, “When I think of lessons, I think of students and what they’re interested in. The kids are the biggest influence.” The data for what students wanted and needed was largely collected by both teachers by watching and listening to students. To determine what students wanted and needed was an ongoing project that was engaged in both the unit planning and in the day-to-day interactions of the classroom - in facilitating dialogue, and the kinds of “on your feet” decisions and interactions that are part and parcel to teaching. As I mentioned earlier, Elle’s notion of considering how students might learn what is needed in the world and what they might have to offer that need, are suggestive of the kind of listening that informed her own pedagogical design. For Nora, this kind of pedagogical design was a departure from the culture of an empowerment school where she had worked for several years prior to coming to Tobin.

My old school was an empowerment school and had weekly quizzes they had to do. Here there is nobody saying you have to. A lot of teachers here build curriculum around what students want and need.

Nora, having taught in an under-resourced school, described her pairing of literacy, art, and multimodality as borne out of necessity. More specifically, this was a necessity she felt to engage students in ways that went beyond the restrictive curriculum she was
required to teach. Innovation was a way of humanizing the curriculum. Coming from this background she said:

This is a really resource rich school, and that is like the complete opposite compared to where I learned to teach, so I feel like I’ve sort of trained myself to kind of, to do things very minimally, ... like I didn’t have a computer in my room.

Doing things minimally meant that although the school was resource-rich to support each of the arts areas, arts-based literacy in the English classes was generally taken up without sophisticated resources aside from an interactive whiteboard. There was some access to the resources of an arts school, but teachers were not without restrictions. Elle described common school limitations, for instance, imposed by lack of computer access:

I haven’t done so many multimodal projects this year, because there’s been some struggle with reserving technology because we don’t have enough… even though we’re expected to do a lot of media projects, we definitely don’t have enough computers to support that for every teacher.

In terms of other curricular restrictions, as I mentioned, teachers were still held to submitting lesson plans around state standards. Both teachers submitted lesson plans using the Understanding By Design framework that was a school-wide expectation for teachers. The dance between innovating and working within mandates for state standards was one that Elle expressed some familiarity with answering:

Yes, especially at conferences usually the questions at the end are about… how does this meet the standards… And I really have to… be prepared to defend that, and to do so in a short amount of time. So yeah, there’s a lot of questions around that…. It’s kind of what makes it fun though, because it’s like dancing within chains kind of… trying to figure out… okay let’s meet the [standard]… lets find another way to do this.

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25 By Wiggins and McTighe, also known as Backward Design
Figuring out “another way to do this” was a stance that Elle lived: “dancing in chains.”

In using the Understanding By Design (UBD) framework, Nora leveraged the multi-genre component which for her, meant thinking through the planning of a unit using many different texts depending on her goals for the unit. The dimensions of arts-based literacy that I noticed were largely not the kinds of learning that were being reported and documented as UBD goals. The things that students and teachers talked about as being most important and meaningful to their work were largely hidden from view in the UBD and district mandates. There was a logic to the design that included each of my three findings which went far beyond the goals outlined in the UBD framework. I hope that part of the value in this work is to make these less visible aspects of their arts-based pedagogy, and what mattered to teachers and students, visible. I hope that this might encourage a consideration of the disconnect between discourses about art and adolescent literacy and what engages students’ and teachers’ hearts and minds.

This disconnect speaks to underlying ways in which this work is against the grain of common discourses around schooling for both students and their teachers. Students came to “do school” differently because their teachers “did teaching” differently. The school itself was somewhat of an island in the district at large. Although it was accountable to district mandates, the principal and teachers expressed their sense of isolation in the work they were trying to do and the general lack of staff development opportunities available. To be sure, within this context, their different histories, orientations to the work, and shared interests, both Nora and Elle were carving their own way; the pedagogies they designed and engaged were inventive pedagogies. Despite their characterization as either artists or non-artist in a conventional sense, they were both
artists and designers of pedagogy. Engaging in what Dewey would call “flexible purposing,” both teachers watched, listened to, and designed curriculum for students according to the resources they could find and according to what they came to know students to want and need. In a climate of mandates and mass produced curricula that deskilled teachers, this was ultimately an innovative practice, an invented practice, and a practice that transgressed expectations outlined in district curriculum guides.

Alongside Elle telling me how much she loved the work: “I love doing it. It keeps it interesting for me,” she also expressed the challenges she felt in isolation: “My biggest challenge,” she told me, “is really how alone I feel sometimes doing this and whether or not my colleagues approve or disapprove of what I’m doing…” Elle described her practice as a leap of faith, “having to kind of plan and believe in this kind of instruction, and just to have faith in it, because there haven’t been too many studies on this.”

This work raises questions in today’s discourses around rigor. Nora grappled with an ongoing concern over what counts as rigor. Although students described their work as some of the most challenging they had had in school, questions remained around whether this work would qualify as rigorous to others. Nora’s pedagogy was designed from a belief in what she described as her own “core beliefs” that guided her practice: a commitment to social justice, and a belief that learning is social, that we can learn from each other, and that learning should be fun. In describing these core principles to me, Nora recognized contested territory around what counts as learning and rigor. Her concern that many of her own theories of practice, what were most important to her teaching, might not be recognized as academic or rigorous by others, was described this way: “I think… sort of the biggest one for me, … and as I am looking at these (core
principles) just now, they are not necessarily academic, but…the biggest one for me, is creating an environment where kids feel really safe and that’s also that’s fun.” Likewise, what the principle described to me as her points of pride in the school do not conform to conventional notions of rigor: how kids treat each other, decency, a culture of kindness – no yelling, student leadership. What counts as academic and what counts as rigor are often contested territory around arts-based and critical literacy pedagogies. This work might suggest that the teachers and students find new ways of defining rigor and new lenses for thinking about what counts as academic. It was clear that what mattered most to teachers, to the principal, and to the students, were not necessarily core standards or measureable outcomes, although they did these things, but the kinds of things that are perhaps unique to art and aesthetic practice: social justice, compassion, care, and ethical, relational work.

A Critical Aesthetic Framework for Literacy Learning

I understood the work students were doing as the cultivation of a particular kind of practice that gained generative potential from the juxtaposition of art and literacy, but more particularly, it was the juxtaposition of the aesthetic and the critical. The pairing of the aesthetic and the critical seemed to be a central, if not explicit, undergirding framework for cultivating the three dimensions of arts-based literacy described in chapters four through six. In this way, this study has provided an empirical space to extend work in arts integration to make sense of a situated relationship between the aesthetic and the critical. Importantly, this has been a place to explore the binaries that are often set up between aesthetics and critical literacy, and to see and theorize what
happened when they were juxtaposed. Although teachers and students did not speak in these terms, they spoke to these ideas that have powerful implications for teaching.

Many resist the term aesthetics because of the way it connotes a particular and definable kind of experience, or an experience that promotes a named and historically generated set of aesthetic values. While some have chosen to reject the term aesthetic altogether, I have found it generative to consider embodied experience and to explore the value of arts-related approaches to education outside of the arts disciplines. An aesthetic framework served as a way of taking into account social, political, and contextual considerations of learning in new ways that are more important now than ever. Since aesthetics takes into account perception, discrimination, and the development of the imagination, it advanced the goals of critical literacy. In this space students learned to engage in an embodied, critical practice.

Multimodality, for instance, which has made important contributions to new and emerging literacies, has been taken up largely outside of considerations of art and aesthetics. But aesthetic considerations of multimodality are important because they draw attention to how art and multimodal texts are experienced, and therefore take into account the relationship between texts, the body, and context. Since aesthetics accounts for joy, pleasure, beauty, the heart, emotion, and intellect as embodied aspects of learning, it can bring these ways of engaging to a wide range of multimodal texts. Art encourages an aesthetic experience by seeking to heighten these responses through conscious and intentional design so that the shaping of the work takes on a heightened significance. As students become creators and users of more diverse media, it will be

26 Anzaldúa (1987), for example describes the “tyranny of the western aesthetic.”
important that they do so mindfully and with awareness of how texts are made and how they function in a relational context. Through an attempt to heighten responses, aesthetic approaches encourage mindfulness to a range of creative and responsive capacities of the inner and outer selves and therefore bring an ethical concern to the fore. Seeing through the eyes of art brings attention to the shape of content (Shan, 1957). It encourages the maker or viewer to see the relationship between parts and wholes, and give attention to the selection of component parts in order to achieve the qualities of intensity, clarity, concentration, and integration (Jackson, p. 37). More attention needs to be given to the relationships among the arts, aesthetics, and multimodality as texts continue to expand and grow exponentially within a changing landscape.

Critical approaches often bump up against our expectations for delight from art. In the children’s literature class I teach at the university to pre-service teachers, there are always some students who resist a close looking at books for which they have a fond childhood nostalgia. Each year, I encounter the pervasive idea that art is for pleasure and meant to be enjoyed and that looking closely at these texts through critical approaches interferes with pleasure. A related form of resistance to critical approaches that I encounter, is that art should serve as a much-needed escape from other kinds of thinking and engaging. While pleasure and escape are invaluable kinds of aesthetic experiences that art and literature can promote, and we do wish to cultivate these in school, they are not the only kinds of aesthetic experiences. And, more importantly, they do not preclude critical approaches.

These arguments are connected to a longstanding marginalization of art in school. In classes at Tobin, the arts provided pleasure, delight, and escape, but they also taught.
Students spoke clearly about the arts “keeping them sane” and about “doing what they love” in school. As Jackson (1998) argues:

The arts do more than provide us with fleeting moments of elation and delight. They expand our horizons. They contribute meaning and value to future experience. They modify our ways of perceiving the world, thus leaving us and the world irrevocably changed (p.33).

Supporting new ways of feeling, thinking, and perceiving, advances the goals of critical pedagogy. When positioned in different ways, art embodies diversity and can support the goals of working toward a more just society. Aesthetics, when combined with critical literacy, can bring care to the fore, and by so doing, render experience more transformable. In this way, aesthetic practice has a change agenda. Additionally, since aesthetic practice in this setting required uncertainty, openness, and relational identity-building, it enhanced the goals of critical inquiry. It used multiple modes and forms as tools for social justice; more modes meant more far-reaching representation, more ways of accessing text, and more ways of knowing another’s experience. As a platform for theorizing and for collective action, aesthetics provided a place to generate knowledge and negotiate diverse perspectives.

The role of aesthetics in critical literacy education is a topic that has been largely absent from mainstream discourses on policy and practice and under-represented in empirical research. The work of these students and teachers suggest new roles for art in school that can position art and aesthetics centrally in learning rather than peripherally. Critical aesthetic ways of knowing ignite the social imagination, can bring joy and openness to perceiving in new ways, and lead to new habits of generating knowledge and acting in the world.
Implications for Teaching

21st Century Learning

Discourses circulate about what is good education for our times and what students will need from school and in life in the coming years. The roles of art and literacy are especially contested: What is good adolescent literacy education? What role does and should art play in learning? An essay by educator and activist Joanne Yatvin (1986) entitled, “The Difference Between Good Schools and Effective Schools,” was recently re-circulated in The Washington Post. In it, Yatvin describes a good school this way:

A good school is a place where children learn enough worthwhile things to make a strong start in life, where a foundation is laid that supports later learning, and where children develop the desire to learn more.

Specifically, a good school mirrors the realities of life in an ordered, adult society; it is rational and safe, a practice ground for the things people do in the outside world. The school creates a sense of community that permits personal expression within a framework of social responsibility. It focuses on learnings that grow through use—with or without more schooling—such as communication skills, decision making, craftsmanship, and group interaction. It makes children think of themselves as people who find strength, nourishment, and joy in learning.

A good school has a broad-based and realistic curriculum with subject matter chosen not only for its relevance to higher education and jobs, but also for family and community membership and personal enrichment. It uses teaching practices that simulate the way people live in the outside world. Children are actively involved in productive tasks that combine and extend their skills. They initiate projects, make their own decisions, enjoy using their skills, show off their accomplishments, and look for harder, more exciting work to do.

Alternately, an effective school, she describes this way:

In contrast, the effective school looks at learning in terms of test scores in a limited number of academic areas. It does not take into consideration problem-solving abilities, social skills, or even complex academic skills. It does not differentiate between dynamic and inert knowledge; it ignores motivation.

The effective school asks much less. Children who “cover” a traditional curriculum in order to “master” as much of it as possible are not initiators,
seekers, or builders. They are at best reactors. The knowledge they dutifully soak up is not necessarily broad based or useful. It is taught because it is likely to appear on tests. It is quickly and easily forgotten.

Although this piece was written over twenty-five years ago, these tensions endure. The narrowing of curriculum continues to have dehumanizing effect on schooling and foster isolation and rugged individualism on the part of both teachers and students. Conflicting discourses persist around what is needed for 21st century learning. Although the last decade has seen increased attention toward adolescent literacies, much of policy has urged a return to basic skills. The return to basics favored in workforce preparation discourses, and the kinds of policies being attached to these discourses and beliefs, present a troublesome irony between what many believe is needed for students to live active and productive lives in the future, and the current course of educational policy and practice.

The tensions between a changing, diversifying world, and narrowing curriculum and policy are creating one of the leading challenges facing public education in these times. Definitions of 21st century literacies circulate widely amidst discourse around what students are going to need “to know and be able to do.” Most of these discourses assume that what students need to know is already known. There is little agreement on what schools are preparing students for, and the kinds of learning opportunities they need. Moreover, what students want is largely not part of the conversation. Common discourses include “life and career skills,” “innovation,” and “competing for jobs in the
global economy.” A sense of urgency permeates: “There’s a crisis in America’s schools” and talk about “keeping up” and “racing to the top.”

Amidst these discourses, art has generally been positioned as playing an instrumental role in core skills transfer. Common core standards for literacy have determined measurable outcomes for what students will need to know and be able to do. Attention to adolescent literacy over the past decade has been largely aimed at skills enhancement and “making every student graduate.” Excellence is measured by outcomes and on the narrow measures of state assessments. While some believe that the purpose of education is to create lifelong learners, others describe what we are preparing students for as success in the workforce, or to be informed members of society. Across many of these discourses, success is a term widely used but without definition or attention to what might count as success for whom and in the coming years. One leading initiatives is The Partnership for 21st Century Learning that describes 21st century needs for students this way:

**Why do students need 21st century skills?** Every child in America needs to be ready for today’s and tomorrow’s world. A profound gap exists between the knowledge and skills most students learn in school and the knowledge and skills they need for success in their communities and workplaces. To successfully face rigorous higher education coursework, career challenges and a globally competitive workforce, U.S. schools must align classroom environments with real world environments by fusing the three Rs and four Cs. ([http://www.p21.org](http://www.p21.org))

The three Rs are assumed to be reading, writing and arithmetic. The four Cs are: critical thinking, communication, collaboration, and creativity. The rationale for why students need these 21st century skills raises a number of questions: What counts as success in community and workplace? Will knowledge and skills prepare students for what lies

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27 See Alliance for Excellent in Education at [http://www.all4ed.org/s](http://www.all4ed.org/s)
ahead in a post-industrial, global society? Innovation, foregrounded as a top priority in this initiative, is defined as the 4 C’s, and these Cs are defined as skills. When innovation, 21st century learning and the 4C’s are positioned as skills, this raises questions about how students learn these in school. Are they skills, capacities, practices, and does it matter in terms of how they are taught and learned? When positioned as skills mastery within a support system that includes standards and assessment as the first dimension, innovation runs the risk of being reduced to what is already known. So, although innovation is targeted as a top priority, the nature of what innovation is and how it is learned is unclear, and how we teach and learn innovation is still largely under-theorized and under-addressed. To assume that innovation, life and career, and media can be taught as skills, may reflect a failure of our own imaginations to envision the kinds of schools that students will need going forward. Although this has been a persistent challenge with transformative teaching, where what is learned does not fit within a framework of measurable outcomes, this challenge is being brought into sharp relief in 21st century discourses about innovation.

Issues around how to teach innovation to the next generation of young adults bring with them questions about the role of joy, imagination, wonder, and curiosity in a high school setting. Innovation is the result of meaningful engagement; it comes from a human capacity to solve problems. Innovation comes from careful observation, from being able to recognize a problem, consider alternatives, and find new ways of solving that problem. In short, innovation stems from inquiry. A student who innovates, as Elle so aptly put it, both knows what is needed and knows what they have to offer that need. Innovation recognizes that there is not one way to solve a problem; it recognizes the role
of humility in being open to uncertainty. More often than not, innovation is fueled by curiosity. Making learning more meaningful for students is a project of creating the conditions for innovation. When schools encourage and welcome adolescents’ lives and questions and innate desires to make sense of their worlds, they create spaces for students to take action and make change in a democratic society. Both teachers and students of 21st century learning need to be designers and innovators. These are all considerations raised by this study that trouble the role of innovation in skills-based, discourses.

There is no question that students will need to develop some specific kinds of skills to prepare them to navigate complex information systems and communicate. But too narrow a focus on skill is both too simple to account for what students need for their futures and too simple to account for how students learn. Too narrow a focus on measureable skills risks stripping the meaning from why these skills are important and renders them virtually unachievable for teachers and students. Studying what makes work meaningful, and how to encourage inquiry-driven approaches to innovation, needs to find its way to the forefront of addressing educational challenges associated with 21st century learning.

This tension extends into issues around both curriculum and pedagogy: what we think we need to teach, as well as how it is taught. Twenty-first century learning discourses have largely focused upon the what, with very little attention being paid to the how, on what students need to know and be able to do, not how they learn to do it. The data from these teachers and students encourage us to consider that in 21st century learning, how we learn is as important, if not more, than what we learn. How do students learn to be students? What capacities and practices do they cultivate in school? What
kinds of learning opportunities nurture and develop the kinds of ways of being and doing we want students to take into their lives? What capacities will prepare students to solve complex problems? To face the ethical challenges inherent in practical decision-making and innovation?

**Art and 21st Century Literacy**

Although art has long been associated with innovation, the role of art and aesthetics in designing learning opportunities for adolescents, has largely been absent in mainstream discourses about literacy policy and practice. Arts integration has not had its own cohesive movement and remains largely considered a frill. Aside from work in arts partnerships such as the Chicago Arts Partnership (CAPE) that has sought more reciprocal relationships between art and literacy, there has been limited attention to the potential for the role of art in literacy learning more broadly in 21st century learning. The attention that has been given has been largely around issues of skills transfer and not practices from socio-critical perspectives that consider the unique capacities that can be learned from and through art in its own right. Multimodality has been less concerned with aesthetics and more focused on modal diversity.

In this study I investigate and explore the potential for art to revitalize and add new direction to ways of thinking about 21st century learning. This study looks to the unique capacities of the arts to foster what many consider mandatory for the 21st century: openness to change, innovation, agency, inquiry, the social imagination, and dialogue across difference. These are not skills that can be learned and transferred, but capacities that can be nurtured through carefully designed pedagogy. And they are largely absent
from common core standards that target and define what students need to know and be able to do in reading and writing.

VanDeWeghe (2011) argues that good literacy education should also include ethical responsibility, human value, and community stewardship, capacities that are nurtured by aesthetic practice. In her book *Aesthetic Education in the Era of Globalization* Spivak (2012) renews the case for an aesthetic education through literary studies in the university. Set amidst the corporatization of schooling, she calls attention to the social urgency of the humanities, and argues that through literature studies and work in the imagination, students build an ethical impulse that is necessary for 21st century interventions. She argues that Schiller’s (2004) notion of aesthetic education must be brought forward into a post-colonial era, to cultural studies, and to the expansion of the canon. She makes a plea that “aesthetic education is the last available instrument for implementing global justice and democracy.”

The work of teachers and students at Tobin extend this argument to suggest that an important generative potential for an aesthetic education in 21st century schools is its application to a range of texts in addition to literature. The work of students and teachers at Tobin suggests that aesthetic education can extend beyond the English classroom into an aesthetic practice that affects how students make sense of, engage in, and act in the world. This work calls for multi-disciplinary approaches to 21st century learning and speaks to the role that art can play in “good” 21st century education.

**Critical Aesthetic Literacy for Our Times**

The students in Nora and Elle’s classrooms offer images of learning skills within practices that were conducive to innovation. In order to advance 21st century democracy
in a globalized diverse society, students will need to be able to talk across difference, listen, ask questions, and work across distinctive goals and interests to solve common problems. This work suggests that discourses around rigor must be extended and enriched to think about work that is not only intellectually challenging, but socially challenging, emotionally challenging, and work that requires an engagement of hearts and minds to solve real world problems. Kincheloe (2008) has said that critical education “seeks to connect with the corporeal and the emotional in a way that understands at multiple levels and seeks to assuage human suffering” (p. 3). In Nora and Elle’s classes, art enhanced the goals of this work and made it more intimate. This image of learning is one where humanity must make its way to the center of curriculum and pedagogy, where it is not seen as an affective, add on, programmatic, character-building exercise, but at the center of intellectual work. It calls for the need to design curriculum and enact pedagogy that is intentionally humanizing to ameliorate the affects of a dehumanizing, commoditized society.

We know that criticality is more important than ever. However, notions of criticality in school practice must be extended into a socio-cultural endeavor and beyond a technical, disembodied, and primarily text-based skill. Here, this was nurtured and cultivated as part of critical aesthetic practice that advanced the kind of multi-perspectival world reading that is necessary to participate in a democracy. Criticality meant finding new ways of looking. As feminist, post-colonial, and cultural studies have expanded notions of the canon, arts-based literacy provided insight into new critical pedagogies that invite multiple perspectives, multicultural sensibilities, and that move from the individual to the collective and multi-voiced.
The work of teachers and students at Tobin sheds light on the generative potential of aesthetic practice to advance these goals of critical literacy. Their work suggests some ways that a critical aesthetic practice for our times is a promising and exciting way of thinking about teaching students to perceive in new ways and to re-imagine what it means to learn. Poetic sensibility and aesthetic education, Schiller (1983) reminds us, are ways of ameliorating the effects of dehumanization. A critical aesthetic is a way of humanizing the curriculum and building capacities, dispositions, and practices at the same time that it promotes, encourages and teaches what are widely considered skills. In a climate of hyper-efficiency that is often focused on getting things done with little consideration about why get things done, or what things matter to get done, a critical aesthetic invites questions of why, what matters, and to whom, with both compassion and intellectual challenge. It restores human needs and self-preservation to curriculum and pedagogy. Because it humanizes, and makes learning whole, it seeks to bring joy. Because it encourages questions, the multi-perspectival and collective action it seeks to bring equity. Like Spivak (2012), I believe there are ethical, political, and cultural consequences of oversight or neglect of an aesthetic education in 21st century learning.

**Implications for Research**

**Situated Research**

It is difficult to locate this research within a tradition. In some ways it was practitioner inquiry since the initial questions stemmed in large part from my own teaching, although I was not the practitioner. The work later became informed by the teachers’ questions and the students’ questions as a fusion of horizons happened over time (Heidegger, 1962). I see this shift not as a compromise but as important to the
integrity of the work, in the sense that it helped me to learn from what was being enacted and practiced beyond my initial preconceptions. In the work, I drew from ethnographic methods that involved a long-term and sustained relationship, but the work was not ethnography. Despite its impurity, the emergence of a way of working together expanded what could be known and was built from the experience of the work. In other words, although I entered with some questions, and some ethnographic tools, the process did emerge out of the work in practice. This required a non-expert-novice relationship, since teachers and students were actively theorizing their own work, as I was theorizing it. The teachers and I consulted with each other at several times during the year to assess our roles and each time there seemed to be concern on each of our ends about making sure the other person was “getting what they needed” and about “making sure it works.” Both teachers were highly collaborative and reflective which made our work together feel truly co-generated. Although at times I am sure it felt like an intrusion, the teachers generally expressed appreciation for what Nora described as “time to reflect” and “to keep shared questions in mind.” Elle expressed an appreciation about being asked targeted questions about practice in order to think through and articulate ideas. It seemed that students and teachers, by and large, wanted to talk through and theorize their work, and any talk that began as a semi-structured interview usually ended in a conversation.

My choice to study Nora and Elle’s work together was a decision that was made by thinking through what it was I wanted to learn. Since my interest was in how students and teachers made sense of arts-based literacy, I was more interested in situating their sense-making than comparing the nature of the learning across classes. I was more interested in what could be learned from each voice and the voices as a whole than by
comparison. Despite the differences in their approaches, the teachers shared core practices. Although I point out some similarities and differences in this implications chapter, my intent was to describe the nature of their experience as a whole - aesthetic practice - and the dimensions of that experience - art as story, art as a theoretical instrument, and arts-based literacy as collective action. An important aspect of the findings and implications is that there is no one way to engage this work and that we need, as bell hooks (1994) said, “diverse programs of critical education that would stimulate the collective awareness that the creation and sharing of art is essential to any practice of freedom” (p.4.).

Some school-based challenges included that student work was at times difficult to track down. Between grading, students turning in assignments when I was not there, turning it in late, or not turning it in, I sometimes was unable to get copies of student work. Because I actively sought to participate in the classes, at times the data collection was compromised. In working in small groups, it was not always possible to record or type when I was engaging with students; there were incidents in the end where I felt I wanted data from conversation that I was unable to record. However, the choice to make these compromises was intentional because I found that both roles were equally important to me, and to my relationship with teachers and students. Finally, some of my challenges came from the fact that is simply difficult to study, document, and make sense of situated learning (Lave & Wenger, 1991). I have attempted to do so with critical complexity in mind in order to try to understand of a web of reality and a lived world of the classroom. Additionally, I have had to remind myself to reject a mimetic motive and
instead to realize that there is no true reflection of what this work meant, only my own perception of it.

**Working with Teachers and Students**

Throughout this dissertation, I took up my questions with and alongside teachers and students, theorizing very much with them about the work they were doing, why they are doing it, and what mattered to them. One of the most difficult aspects of the design was my process of trying to take into account teachers’ and students’ perspectives as well as my own, and to make sense of our ideas amidst policy and research. I am reminded that, as a participatory project, the most recognizably meaningful aspect for me remains my days spent with the teachers and students in their classrooms. I am humbled by the challenge of attempting to render this work in a meaningful way because I do believe it has so much to teach. The tenth grade students’ voices remind me of the danger of a single story and despite my attempts to include their voices, I am ultimately responsible for the telling.

The messiness of the project also entailed the ways in which teaching and research are intertwined. As a teacher and researcher, I brought both of these ways of looking to my work. I am energized by what these students and teachers have to offer about the generative potential of art and literacy. This is one attempt, but clearly we need more socio-cultural research on arts, critical literacy, and inquiry for adolescents, and more teacher and student voices about what this work means to them and how they engage it. I am convinced that adolescents and their teachers must not only be consulted, but an active part of the design process of re-imagining schools, that they have the most
important insights about what schooling could look like, and about what is needed for schools to work better.

The teacher and student voices about what engaged their hearts and minds have implications for pedagogy, policy, and research related to the intersections between the arts and adolescent literacy in 21st century learning. We need to design more schools that are the kinds of places where students willingly get up at four in the morning and ride three busses to get to in order to learn in an academically challenging environment where they find ways to do what they love and where they think they are being prepared for the future in a meaningful way. Given the flood of interest and policy around 21st century learning, coalitions will be important to generate more complex approaches to the certain challenges of learning in the next century. Stakeholders across the fields of art and literacy education have an important role to play in theorizing and researching imagination and innovation in 21st century learning. More studies are needed that explore sustained, aesthetic and critical practice, an intersection that has been largely absent from mainstream discourses on policy and practice. Despite its complexity, we need to find meaningful ways of talking about aesthetic experience in education, and how it intersects with critical literacy teaching and learning so that art can be recognized as having an important role to play going forward.
APPENDIX: Sample Interview Questions

Questions for Students

Questions About Students’ Experiences at Benjamin Rush

• How did you come to this school?
• What is your arts major?
• Tell me about yourself as a reader? A writer? An artist?
• How is art important in your life?
  What is the role/place of art at home?
  What kinds of interaction with art do you have outside of school?
  How did you become interested in art (and/or their major?)
• How is learning through and with the arts similar or different to other kinds of
  learning you’ve experienced?
  How is it similar to or different from how you were taught at your old
  school?
• I notice that art isn’t just taught in art class here. In what classes do you see arts
  integrated?
  What is that like for you?
  Can you give an example?
  How is it similar to or different from how you were taught at your old
  school?
• I notice that art is integrated in English class here.
  What is that like for you?
  Can you give me an example?
  How is it similar to or different from how you were taught at your old
  school?
• What are some things that puzzle you about art integration in English class?
  What are some challenges? What’s hard about it?
• How do you think your education at Rush is going to help you in the future?
What do you think you are going to need?
Do you have plans for after high school? If so, what?

- What is it like to go to school here?
- What would you say to a prospective student who is considering coming here?
- Arts are not often integrated school-wide in high school. What would you say to education policy makers about the role that the arts should play in high school and why?
  
  How does it affect learning?
  
  Can you give an example from your experience?
- Sometimes people think art is just for fun. What do you think about this?
  
  What does art have to do with learning, for you?
- I notice that this school has students from over 45 different schools across the city, and a student body that is socio-economically, racially, linguistically, and culturally diverse?
  
  How does this impact learning for you at this school?
- What do you want me to know that I haven’t asked?

Questions About Specific Student Work

- Tell me about your work.
  
  What was the nature of the assignment?
  
  What is your work about?
- Where did your ideas for this come from?
  
  Did you do research?
  
  What inspired you to do it this way?
- Why did you choose to present your ideas in this way (print, visual, multimodal hybrid, etc)?
  
  Why not ______ (another way)?
- What design choices did you make in this process of deciding how to present your work this way?
  
  How did you make the decision to do ________?
• What was hard about doing it this way?
  Can you tell me more about that?
• What aspects of doing it this way worked for you?
  Why/how so?
  Did anything surprise you?
• Have you talked about this work with others?
  If so, how?
  Or, will you in the future?
  If so, how?
• How is this work similar to or different from other work you have done?
  At this school or elsewhere?
• What work this semester are you most proud of?
  Can you tell me more about that work?
  Why?
  How did it compare to other things you have done?
  How are these alike or different from assignments at your other school?
• In class, I noticed that you said __________.
  Can you say a little more about that?
• What do you want me to know that I haven’t asked you?

Questions for English Teachers

Questions About Teaching at Benjamin Rush
• How did you come to teach at Rush Arts?
• How do you envision the role of arts-based learning in your classroom?
• How do you think about planning to teach English through and with the arts?
• What beliefs about arts-based literacies do you draw upon in your planning and teaching?
• What are some struggles or challenges are you facing in teaching English class through and with the arts?
• What affordances do you see for teaching English class through and with the arts?
• What do you think students need to know in order to understand meaning through multiple modes/art forms?
• Where do your ideas about this work come from?
• How does teaching through and with the arts compare to other ways that you have taught English?
• What questions do you have about teaching English class through and with the arts?
• What challenges do you face in teaching English through and with the arts?
• How did you come to be a teacher in an arts-based school?
• What role have the arts played in your life?
• What role have the arts played in previous teaching roles
  How did you become interested in integrating art?
• I noticed that in class ___________. What were your reactions to that?
• What do you want me to know that I haven’t asked?

Questions About Specific Pedagogical Approaches
• Why did you decide to teach ______ this way?
• How did you plan for ________?
  Where did your ideas come from?
• What affordances did you see in teaching ______ this way?
• What worked well in teaching _______ this way?
  Why do you think that is?
• What struggles or challenges did you face in teaching ______ this way?
  How did you address them?
  What would you do differently next time?
• What surprised you in teaching ________?
• What questions did teaching ________ raise for you?
• What are you most proud of from this ________ (class/unit/project)?
• What do you want me to know that I haven’t asked you?
Note: These were an elastic set of questions that I drew upon in both formal and informal interviews with students and teachers. The questions were designed as a guiding tool for flexible use in situated conversations.
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