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Journal *of* Artistic &  
Creative Education.

*VOLUME 5 / NUMBER 1 / 2011*

JACE / VOLUME 5 / NUMBER 1 / 2011

# Journal of Artistic & Creative Education.

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The Journal of Artistic and Creative Education (JACE) is an on-line journal that can be accessed at [jaceonline.com.au](http://jaceonline.com.au)

JACE is a peer-reviewed journal published twice each year that explores issues of artistry and creativity in contemporary research and teaching, and the interface between them. The journal seeks to promote praxis, to provide an evidence-based bridge between arts and artistic practice, creative practices in educational contexts, and learning research and theory in all these areas.

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ISSN: 1832 - 0465

Published in Australia

Publisher: Melbourne Graduate School of Education,  
University of Melbourne, Parkville, Victoria 3010.

JACE is peer reviewed as per section 4.3.4 of the HERDC Specifications.

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# EDITORIAL: ARTISTRY AND 'THE PERSONAL' IN EDUCATION

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Wesley Imms *University of Melbourne*

This issue of JACE highlights some of the breadth and complexity of artistry in education. Is it possible to conflate the personal with the social in a manner that celebrates both individual art making and collegial social learning? This issue explores such a paradox through four articles that individually address the role the arts play in providing students opportunities to collaborate, yet does so while celebrating 'the personal' in learning. Deborah Fraser and Graham Price from New Zealand begin this conversation by emphasising the value of shared learning in primary settings. Their research utilises arts research methods to investigate the benefits of social learning in art activities, while providing evidence of the importance of the personal in the art making practice. In contrast, Canadian Carl Leggo's work is highly individual in focus. He paints a captivating image of what can

happen when one immerses oneself in the artistry of the written word. He broadens his perspective to the possibilities that exist when one engages in conversations with others about poetry – the ‘shared social learning’ spoken of in Deborah and Graham’s article. An essential component of Carl’s article that captivates the reader is the joyful indulgence of simply immersing yourself in art; who would not like to simply spend time reading, writing or making? Fellow Canadian Nicholas Stanger does exactly this in his writing. He takes us, both in text and by video link to the ‘magic place’ of his childhood, and encourages us to indulge ourselves in the reminiscence of past pleasures. The immediacy of his foray into Vancouver’s beautiful woods (he does this in preference to a morning coffee), the serendipity of found materials and childlike activities, and the power of creating transient artworks all remind us of the personal pleasures many of us have enjoyed in our youth. Anne Harris and Jon Staley remind us that not all children have memories to treasure, but can build positive memories through the arts. Their central thesis remains constant with the previous authors, in that they celebrate the ‘authentic creative journey’ as a method for tapping ‘the personal’ while still addressing wider social possibilities of the arts. This issue contains a suite of beautifully crafted accounts of the myriad way the arts allow us to indulge in the personal while communicating with others and building the social networks necessary for a better community.

This issue marks the launch of JACE’s new format. It has moved to its own URL in a bid to allow a ‘tablet friendly’ format and the capacity to experiment with other interactive features. In addition, with the creation of an eEditorial team the move will provide JACE freedom over time to develop graphics packages more in keeping with its creative and artistic mandate. During the coming months the editorial team will convert previous issues to the new website (retaining for these articles the original formatting to maintain pagination) and will experiment with a greater use of visuals and other features in newer issues. This is an exciting time for JACE, and the Editorial Board wishes to express its gratitude to the authors contributing to recent issues for their patience.

# LEARNING AS A SHARED SOCIAL ENDEAVOUR

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Deborah Fraser *University of Waikato*

Graham Price *University of Waikato*

Deborah Fraser was the director of the Art of the Matter project. Her other research interests include curriculum integration, creativity and the use of metaphor.

Graham Price is a senior lecturer in arts education. He was a researcher in the Art of the Matter project and was also a project leader for the professional development of primary teachers in art education.

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## *Abstract*

Despite the legacy of progressive education, current trends in western schooling favour an emphasis on individual achievement and external standards. Much of what happens in primary classrooms is embedded in social contexts yet education policy is increasingly reflecting an emphasis on learning as a highly individual enterprise. This paper discusses a project which highlights Dewey's emphasis on learning as a shared social endeavour in which children are partners with teachers and peers in shared activities and goals. Two vignettes from the project are drawn from data collected during the project. These vignettes show that when the social context is valued the arts manifest multiple opportunities for children to be active participants and learners. There are however, constraints and issues that require consideration and these are outlined. Nonetheless, we argue that learning as a social endeavour in the arts affords children agency and is timely a reminder of Dewey's message.

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## Introduction

Throughout the history of western education beliefs have oscillated in terms of what counts as learning. In contemporary times, the policy pendulum appears to have swung back to an emphasis on individual achievement as measured against an external standard in order to gauge what children know and can do. Added to this is the growing concern over publication of league tables showing the performance of schools based upon individuals' achievement in summative assessments. This is in stark contrast to viewing learning as a collaborative process that is socially mediated and negotiated, that is messy and unpredictable, and that is not able to be captured by individual test results (Nuthall, 2001).

It is timely to revisit the legacy of progressive education as western education policies are, in general terms, swinging back to a narrowing of curriculum, assessment driven teaching, reporting to standards, and a re-emphasis on individual learning. This trend in education policy has led some to claim that progressive education is dead (Lowe in the UK, 2007) and that collaborative planning and decision-making as found in progressive education largely eludes schools (Apple & Beane in the USA, 1999).

Progressive education valued the child as an active participant in learning and acknowledged the social context as an inextricable part of how learning takes place (Dewey, 1916). As an influential philosopher of education, Dewey's views contrasted with the teacher-centred pedagogical approaches of his day. He promoted the classroom as a space to foster learning as a shared social endeavour with children as partners with teachers and peers.

The article briefly revisits Dewey's belief in learning as a shared, social endeavour and its continued relevance for contemporary teaching and learning. It then discusses a project on learning in the arts in the primary school. The project is briefly described and two vignettes are shared that highlight a number of issues when learning is considered a shared, social endeavour. These vignettes are used to illustrate the significance of the social context and reveal a considerable amount about what children know and can do when they have agency in the classroom including the chance to negotiate content and

method with others. They also provide examples of how the arts can offer ripe contexts for social interaction. However, there are also constraints to consider. There are individual learning opportunities that can be suppressed by the dynamics of interaction when shared social endeavours are the mainstay of classroom learning. These are also outlined and the implications discussed.

### *Revisiting the value of learning as a social endeavour*

The value of the social context for learning is far from new. Centuries ago the Talmud stated that readers should have a learning partner to study the meaning of its contents. The Socratic method promoted dialogue between learners who were encouraged to generate and discuss ideas amongst themselves, as well as with their teacher. In the 17th century Comenius broke with the traditional church hierarchy of his day by encouraging (amongst other radical ideas) peer interaction in learning. And a number of curriculum reports and documents have long recommended the value of the social context in learning (Hadow, 1926; Pepitone, 1980; Plowden, 1967; Taba, 1969).

One of the most notable advocates of children's agency and learning as a shared endeavour was the classic educational philosopher John Dewey (1916). He viewed the ideal classroom environment as both social and democratic. For him, children learn best in environments where collaborative processes and active learning are encouraged. This includes negotiated decisions about the content taught and the method used. Dewey was a keen advocate of what is considered contemporary practice with the teacher as a guide rather than a top-down autocrat. His notion of progressive education (called child centred education in the UK and NZ) advised teachers to build upon the interests and experiences of children. He recognised that learning could not be forced upon the young, rather, the social context of the classroom should foster learning as engaging in shared activity, wherein those involved have a vested interest in accomplishing certain tasks, processes or goals. Interestingly, he noted that not only would interests be shared but so too would "ideas and emotions" (p. 13). For Dewey the classroom is "truly educative in its effect in the degree in which an individual shares or participates in some conjoint activity" (1916, p. 22). Conjoint activity was deemed necessary

because for Dewey, children learnt best when active, involved, and participating in both the classroom and the wider school community. This legacy of Dewey's with his emphasis on the social context, remains evident in the contemporary work of such scholars as Beane (1997, 2005), Apple and Beane (1999); Boomer, Lester, Onore and Cook (1992) and Bishop and Berryman (2006). Each of these writers emphasises the importance of collaborating with students in a variety of ways from curriculum negotiation (e.g., students posing questions and suggesting investigations to guide a unit of study), to collective activities, through to joint decision making within tasks. Bishop and Berryman noted that these processes take students' views seriously, conveying the clear message that they are knowledgeable participants in important decisions about their learning.

When teachers foster learning as a social endeavour, the emphasis shifts from monologue by the teacher to conscious dialogue with children and between children (Mayo, 2002). This requires a shift in the interactions, strategies and roles of the teacher and the child from one-way transmissive communication styles of question and response, to braided discussion patterns and largely unpredictable dialogue (Hansen, 2006; Sewell, 2006). Social practices and relationships are thus pivotal, as meaning is not located solely in things and events "but in social practices in which things, gestures, sounds, events play a role" (Hansen, 2006, p. 31). Wilson (2008) also commented that children's art in schools is invariably a collaborative event symbolising the joint efforts of adults and children. Learning is thus about participation in what are largely social practices and for Dewey, education has the significant function of constructing, and renewing social groups. The implications of this informed a recent project in the arts, the details of which are briefly outlined next.

### *Art of the Matter project*

'Art of the Matter' was a collaborative research project based in New Zealand. The project comprised 10 experienced primary school teachers with classes of children across the Year 0-6 range, working alongside three university-researchers over a period of two years (Fraser, D., Henderson, C., Price, G., Bevege, F., Gilbert, G., Goodman, A., Jones, O., Klemick, A., McRae, H., Pye, F., Rose, L., Thompson,

K., & Tyson, S., 2006). The overall aim of the project was to investigate how children's development of ideas in the arts can be promoted, enhanced and refined in primary classrooms by generalist teachers and in doing so, build knowledge related to arts pedagogy and research. 'Art of the Matter' involved research in all four of the arts disciplines (dance, drama, music and visual arts). This paper draws particularly upon data from the drama and visual arts findings.

The New Zealand school curriculum mandates the teaching of all four arts disciplines by generalist teachers in primary schools (Ministry of Education, 2000, 2007). The experienced primary teachers in the 'Art of the Matter' project were familiar with the curriculum through a range of professional development opportunities in the arts which they participated in from 2000 to 2003. All 10 teachers used the arts regularly in their programmes both as art forms in their own right, and as a means of integrating across other curriculum areas. These were generalist teachers, not specialists, who were required to cover all curriculum areas.

The design of the study drew on case study, self-study and action research traditions of educational research. Case studies of teachers' existing practices were produced by the team of teacher partners and university researchers, and these highlighted themes and issues related to how children develop their ideas in the arts, including what appeared to support or constrain this process. The case studies were devised from an amalgam of classroom observations including video and audio-tape, work samples, surveys, interviews with teachers and children, and reflective self-study comments. Classroom observations were undertaken by two university researchers working in tandem; one taking a continuous running record and the other noting particular supports and constraints in developing arts ideas. Notes were compared after each observation and discussions held with the teacher partners to probe assumptions and clarify points. Analysis consisted of both inductive and deductive methods. Data were deductively analyzed in terms of what appeared to support and constrain ideas. In addition, the existing common rituals of pedagogical practice were noted. Also, an inductive process of description, followed by interpretation, was undertaken by all the research team upon viewing video footage at regular roundtable meetings. Moreover, perspectives from teachers,

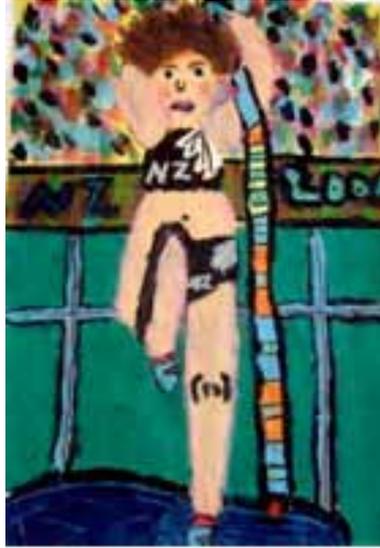
university staff, children and school policy documents helped to build rich, triangulated sense-making accounts of current practice. These case studies provided a platform upon which to base the action research phase wherein teacher partners devised questions of concern to explore problems, issues and possibilities. Ongoing discussion amongst all the research team enabled the refining of both questions and methods. Teacher partners were assisted in this process by the university researchers acting as critical friends as well as joint investigators (see also Ewing, Smith, Anderson, Gibson & Manuel, 2004). One of the themes that emerged from the study was the conjoint nature of teaching and learning in and through the arts. The significance of social relationships was manifested in a variety of ways. The next section of this paper will consider this social context in more detail, with particular reference to a drama, and a visual art vignette which illustrate the conjoint nature of learning.

### *Shared learning in visual art*

In all of the art forms the project found evidence of children guiding, instructing and advising each other, either incidentally, or more explicitly. There was evidence of children actively seeking feedback from each other and responding to this, whether the teachers encouraged this or not. Peers were instrumental in promoting learning in a variety of ways.

The following observations were made in a Year 6 classroom during three painting lessons in the second year of the project. The teacher's focus in this action research phase of the project was to actively encourage conjoint learning between peers. In this classroom a small whiteboard in the art bay was regularly used by children to signal queries, discoveries and new found expertise. Some examples of peer expertise included colour mixing to create skin colours, creating hues and tones, media control, or achieving a sense of perspective. The teacher who actively encouraged this peer teaching signalled clear messages about learning. She repeatedly conveyed and affirmed that teaching comes from multiple sources and that learning from peers is part of the many possibilities available. She would often defer an inquiry to a child 'expert' (e.g., "Go and see what Monique came up

with when she tackled that”) and gave children multiple pathways to seek support.

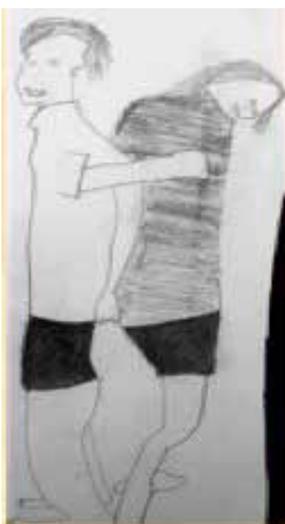


*See Alice for help with skin tones*

During the lesson the teacher regularly nurtured peer-to-peer feedback by frequently using the questioning stems such as, “Does anyone have a challenge for...?”, “Can you tell Daniel what you did with yours Tahu?” and “Who has another idea for Meriana?”

The challenges were invitational rather than mandatory and it was noted that children in the class felt empowered to side-step teacher initiated challenges and generate their own. It was clear from the children’s reactions that the classroom culture that had been fostered was such that controversy and opposing points of view were welcomed if expressed respectfully, and there was a general recognition that such tensions were healthy when aimed at improving learning.

The climate of the classroom enabled ‘natural’ formations of groups around problems that require the pooling of expertise between children. The ‘experts’ were not always the same children each time, as there was a staggered entry to the painting task, that is, children undertook their painting task one group at a time while others were engaged in other curriculum activities. This one-group-at-a-time seemed to foster a pooling of expertise as children came to the task at different stages. New experts kept emerging during different stages of the painting experiences. Prior discoveries by some children (which had been noted on the whiteboard) were subsequently built upon by their peers. For example, when Tariq was struggling with depicting foreshortening of a figure’s limbs he consulted Emma who had solved the same problem in her painting. Emma used digital camera shots to help her capture foreshortening which she tried as a sketch.



*How do I show  
my back foot?*

Access to skills and techniques were on a need-to-know basis as children during painting tackled the task at hand. The ways in which children asked for and received help from their peers seemed a natural part of classroom discourse (e.g., While Geordie painted himself on his boogie board in the sea he asked his peer, “Does this look like water to you?”).



*Does this look like water to you?*

There was a palpable sense of peer support, information sharing and reciprocity as evidenced by the willingness of children to help when a problem arose for those painting. The social support of peers was cohesive as they had “aims in common, and the activity of each member is directly modified by knowledge of what others are doing” (Dewey, 1916, p. 21). The involvement of peers as teachers like this also mitigates the problem of one teacher attempting to meet all the fine-tuned needs of individuals, which can vary greatly across 30 children in any class. In their peer interactions these children demonstrated sophisticated ways of patiently demonstrating possibilities, encouraging opportunities for skill building through repetition, checking each other’s understanding, and allowing each learner to take responsibility for their own decisions, extending the invitation to seek further help once this had been tried. Such maturity of insight and timing was obviously part of the classroom culture, embedded in their observation and the daily practise that was modelled by their own teacher.



*The teacher leading a class conference.*

When a commonly held problem emerged across all groups, a class conference around the issue was called. During the conference the teacher took a more leading role in probing understanding, making suggestions, and building on what a variety of children offered. In the photograph above the teacher is guiding the children with choosing the 'best' sketch they have made of the body-in-action in preparation for making a painting. Her guidance to the class as they sat in a circle was to say, *"I suggest that you have a look through your booklet and have a think about which sketch you particularly like and why...look at the sketch that really stands out to you, in your mind; and is it one you'd like to work with more"*. The children studied their sketch books, poring over the drawings. During this process the teacher remained seated in the circle with them, watching them self-select. When they seemed to have settled on a key drawing she continued, *"When you've got the sketch [you want] in front of you, turn to the person beside you and tell them why that sketch and what it is about the movement that you think you'll be able to portray in your painting really well. OK?"* At this point the children turned to each other and animatedly discussed their selections with justification. This example showed the teacher encouraging self-assessment which was then elaborated on through peer interaction. Individual decision-making was supported by the social context which also provides a sounding-board for one's preferences.

During a subsequent lesson she also called upon some children to demonstrate or display through their art work in progress, a concept that other children had overlooked. For example, “*The first thing that captures your eye should be the important thing you want to say...What do you notice about Alice’s painting?*” The teacher in such instances is responsive to children’s actual needs as they emerge rather than instructive about their perceived needs. This distinction is important if teachers are to avoid teaching what children already know (Nuthall, 2001) or alternatively, teaching what children are not yet ready for.

Later, as the painting unit progressed, the university researcher was occasionally included in consultation for suggestions when the teacher was unsure about unfolding directions thus creating a wider community of inquiry beyond the classroom itself. Again, the notion of seeking guidance came from a need-to-know basis and not from a top-down model of what the expert thinks is required. This conscious inclusion of expertise beyond the classroom was extended to teacher colleagues and invited artists throughout the school year. The involvement of community artists in this manner is particularly rich. Research shows (e. g., Caterall & Waldorf, 1999; Chicago Arts Partnership in Education, 2009) that vibrant school arts programmes regularly draw upon outside experts to inspire, mentor and guide. Surveying the local community to locate these people and inviting them to share their expertise is a way to model community learning for adults and children alike. As such, learning as a shared endeavour was evident at the school level with established procedures that encouraged collaboration with a variety of experts.

What also emerged in this classroom is the multiplicity of communities of learning that co-existed. Rather than considering the classroom as a single community of learning there were numerous small ‘communities’ forming, seeking help and dissolving as needed. The fact that children were often pursuing different tasks asynchronously meant that they seldom had a synchronised goal. However, when a collective concern or problem did arise over time, this called for a community, or class conference as noted earlier. While the notion of the classroom as a community of practice is often proposed by educators it is evident that classrooms seldom comprise a single community (Dewey,

1916; Gutierrez & Rogoff, 2003) despite the contained nature of a single-cell classroom of children within a school environment. Instead, it was quite common for smaller, organic communities to form, coalesce, grow and disband depending on mutual needs and goals. This fluidity seems important if learning as a shared social endeavour is to be drawn upon and maximised when required. Roth and Lee (2006) go further and claim that “the notion of community in the context of classrooms is inappropriate and even false - unless the students concretely realize the collectively defined motive and some choice and control...” (p. 31). An example in which such a collectively defined motive emerged from student choice and control, is outlined in the following section.

### *Shared learning during teacher-in-role*

This second vignette emerged from exploring teacher-in-role in drama in a Year 3 class. Teacher-in-role is a key strategy in the approach known as ‘process drama’ in which the teacher enters an imagined world as fellow participant with the children (Bolton, 1998; O’Connor, 2006; O’Toole & Dunn, 2002). Teachers find that by entering a role alongside children they can negotiate content and method, take risks alongside children, and thus quite naturally model learning as shared, social endeavour.

The teacher concerned had been trying out ways to increase children’s ownership and decision making during teacher-in-role. However, even she was unprepared for the following diversion from the lesson. Her intention was to involve the children in a retelling of the Maori legend ‘Maui and the Sun’ (a traditional story wherein Maui and his brothers catch the sun with ropes and punish it so it will move more slowly across the sky, giving us more hours of daylight). She had not long entered the classroom dressed in a long golden cloak (an old curtain) and introduced herself in role as the sun, when a challenging synchronicity arose; the grey day was suddenly illumined as actual sunlight burst into the classroom. This created quite some excitement and puzzlement from the children as both the real sun and the fictional sun (the teacher) was simultaneously present. One of the children volunteered, “*That must be your mother.*”



*Metaxis: The real sun shines upon the fictional sun*

This was a clear demonstration of metaxis (the drama participant's dual awareness of the real world and the fictional world), and the following discussion ensued:

T= Teacher; G= girl; B= boy

T: I'm very lonely. My name's Te Ra – the sun – and you've called me here today.

G1: Are you a girl or a boy?

G2: Are you a girl or a boy?

T: My name's Te Ra; I'm a girl. I'm a girl sun.

*(G1 writes this on the class whiteboard. The teacher-in-role as the sun sits on the floor with the children in a circle)*

T: What questions do you have for me? I'm very lonely. I don't get called out very often for I'm at the centre of the universe...

B1: Is your Mum coming to Room 1?

*(reference to the real sun that shone into the classroom)*

T: She is, she's coming...

*(children talk; indecipherable)*

G1: It must be lunch time. (*girl stands and talks directly to the teacher*). You ring your Mum up; you ring your Mum up and tell your Mum that, she can have some lunch at Room 1. I'll go ring her! (*walks off to call the sun's mother*)

B2: But we don't know the number. (*tone of disappointment*)  
(*general discussion amongst children*)

T: Yes, it's 0800SUNSHINE.

G3: (*Calling to G1*) Put SUNSHINE at the end!



*You ring your Mum up...*



*A haka to welcome the sun's mother to lunch at Room 1*

Through child initiative the entire drama shifted into the impromptu use of a phone conversation convention to invite ‘the mother’ (the sun outside in the sky) to lunch with the class. When another child disappointedly said, “But we don’t know the number,” the teacher continued to build belief through offering; “Yes, it’s 0800 SUNSHINE”. The process drama continued to explore mother-daughter relationships rather than pursuing the planned narratives of Maui, his brothers and the sun. Girl one’s response to the real sun’s arrival demonstrated the level of commitment and conviction the child had reached, and her evident sense of ‘permission’ to create and make impromptu ‘offers’ within the drama. The teacher’s response within role deepened the commitment and initiative of this child, while her use of the phone call convention allowed the child to deepen the idea and bring the rest of the class along with her. Here, teacher-in-role enabled the pursuit of an unplanned direction that underlined education as a shared and unpredictable endeavour. The class in groups then went about developing ways to welcome the sun’s mother. The resulting outcomes featured dances, chants, songs and a haka (traditional Maori challenge). It was interesting to note from the teacher’s reflection that the mother relationship was much closer to the interests and experiences of the children than the re-telling of the story. This reflects the intent of Dewey’s progressive education in terms of the import of drawing upon children’s worlds in education.

As well as being an illustration of metaxis, this vignette also demonstrates a significant advantage of teacher-in-role to foster shared learning. The primary function of teacher-in-role, as illustrated here, is to usefully disrupt relationships with children in the real world, to signal an invitation to children to enter an imagined world, and to offer children power and responsibility within that world. The teacher uses role to model, to hook the children into the drama, and then to gradually hand over creative power to them. This process is social, highly skilful, nuanced, and largely intuitively driven. According to Prior (2001) the major challenge for the teacher is to let go and share “the created world with their students” (p. 28). Where this kind of power sharing occurs, the teacher no longer ‘owns’ the drama; rather, it becomes a collaborative endeavour.

Thus, teacher-in-role can be a highly valuable tool for fostering relationships where children can have their ideas taken seriously and can determine the direction of their learning. At its best, teacher-in-role can epitomize Gallagher's (2000) ideal of the teacher as "the person in the equation who creates the spaces of possibility, who does not find solutions but nurtures the questions, while asking the learners to bring what they already know to bear on what they are learning" (p. 114). This vignette also underlines the dialogic nature of teaching and learning when content and method are negotiated (Boomer et al., 1992). Through sharing in a conjoint drama process, both teacher and students enter an unpredictable but often fertile creative space, rich with possibility. Dewey himself argued that one of the consequences of participation in conjoint activities is that the boundaries between teacher and learner become blurred:

... the alternative to furnishing ready-made subject matter and listening to the accuracy with which it is reproduced is not quiescence, but participation, sharing, in an activity. In such shared activity, the teacher is a learner, and the learner is, without knowing it, a teacher--and upon the whole, the less consciousness there is, on either side, of either giving or receiving instruction, the better. (Dewey, 1916, p. 160)

Teacher-in-role as illustrated here provides an example of instruction that is owned by neither teacher nor learner but rather, a fluid process between both.

### *Challenges and limitations of the social context*

Learning as a social process is brought to life in classrooms that encapsulate shared endeavours like those illustrated in these vignettes. Nonetheless, such an approach to pedagogy is not without its challenges and limitations. For example, the emphasis on the social and community life of classrooms can squeeze out important moments of quiet, solo contemplation; moments when the child can become absorbed in the world of dream and reverie, so important for the liberation of the unconscious (Claxton, 1998), playful exploration,

and the development of the self. During absorption with the task at hand learners can enter what Csikszentmihalyi (1996) termed a flow state as they are fully engaged, acutely concentrating, unselfconscious, and totally present. All of these qualities are indicative of the keen attention and perception of deep learning. That is not to say that learning as a shared endeavour cannot foster dream and reverie or flow states; rather it is to caution that the emphasis on the social context should not eliminate quiet alone time. This personal, reflective time allows children to become immersed in and with the art medium. If teachers are to help children understand and respond to the medium they are working in, children need uninterrupted and repeated engagement with it. This becomes most apparent in visual art which is non-verbal and usually undertaken individually. The encounter with the 'other' in visual art is often more metaphysical than social. Franck (1973) in *The Zen of Seeing* alludes to this:

Instead of the pleasures of so called self-expression, you will discover a greater one: the joy of letting a leaf, a branch, express itself, its being, through you. In order to reach that point you'll have to see that which you are drawing, whether leaf, plant, or weed, as the most important thing on earth, worthy of your fullest deepest attention. (p. 24)

While the social context is important in learning, so too is the uninterrupted encounter with the art medium itself. Much of what we do in the arts does not require verbal interaction, and much can be expressed through silence, through gesture, and through absorption in the physical act of doing and creating. The outcome is unknown and minute by minute the medium is giving feedback to the child, who in interaction with the medium is learning to be keenly observant, to be responsive, and to make choices and qualitative judgements. The 'conversation' a child has during learning is with the work itself as the child becomes acquainted with the surprises and qualities of clay, paint, movement, charcoal, texture, tone and so forth (Eisner, 2000). Privileging social contexts, peer mediated learning, and conjoint learning can suppress opportunities for children's immersion in the art medium, an encounter that also enhances learning in largely

non-verbal, unconscious ways. The artist knows that discussion and explanation are not sufficient to express the process of creating which is largely non-logical, instinctive and intuitive. As Eisner argued, “the arts make vivid the fact that neither words in their literal form nor number exhaust what we can know” (2000, p. 8). Clearly, there are relationships beyond the social that constitute learning.

When learning is considered a shared, participatory endeavour then teachers require considerable pedagogical content knowledge and comfort with the unknown in order to respond to the unpredictable and follow fertile lines of inquiry with their class. Pedagogical content knowledge encapsulates the idea that content knowledge alone is not sufficient; the teachers who view learning as a conjoint activity know how to bridge the gulf between their expertise and what students need. Of necessity they have to be creative about conveying complex concepts in clear and accessible ways and also confident about pursuing ideas that emerge unexpectedly in classroom interactions. With everyday pressures to cover curriculum and monitor outcomes, teachers can stymie divergent views and block unexpected avenues of interest that emerge. In the haste to ‘achieve’ what is required by curriculum or national standards, they can overlook moments which arise that present opportunities where the outcome is unknown, the risks are great, but the gains potentially greater. The flexibility, nuance and intuition required by the teacher requires a connoisseurship (Eisner, 2002) that is difficult, if not impossible, to teach to another in any explicit way. This raises considerable challenges for teacher education requiring ongoing indepth research on the pedagogical implications. It requires opportunities for students of teaching to implicitly learn alongside a more able other through immersion in situations that foster their powers of observation and sensitivity (Atkinson & Claxton, 2000). Just as “learning in the arts requires the ability and willingness to surrender to the unanticipated possibilities of the work as it unfolds” (Eisner, 2000, p. 8) so too does learning as a shared social endeavour require a sensitivity to nuance that enables a responsiveness to what unfolds during the dynamic nature of classroom interactions.

While learning as a shared activity seems to downplay the contribution of the teacher a number of commentators caution that the teacher still has a vital role to play in ensuring that suitable challenge is present and that all children are learning, not just a few (e. g., Boomer et al., 1992; Brophy, 2006; Dewey, 1916; Nuthall, 2001; Sewell, 2006). In the drama vignette discussed earlier, the rest of the class may have shown no interest in the notion of two suns as mother and daughter that was proposed by one of their peers, and may have opted out of the 'game' or merely gone along with the fictional solution in a desultory fashion. Observations and the video footage suggest however, that this was not the case and that the children readily committed themselves to what became a compelling alternative narrative arising from the metaxis. Nonetheless, part of the teacher's role is to closely monitor children's engagement and be wary of the illusion that all are learning or at least engaged, when this might not be the case (Nuthall, 2001). Furthermore, a complete reliance on learning as a shared endeavour can at times, be an inefficient way to progress in learning. Some learning requires more direct whole class instruction; some requires individual pursuit; and some requires the teacher to be explicit and informative about what needs to be done. Any effective teacher will know the value of a wide repertoire of pedagogical approaches and the importance of being flexible with those approaches in the light of children's needs.

When peers contribute to classroom discourse as both teachers and learners (as illustrated in the visual art vignette), the challenge of engaging all children in the class is somewhat ameliorated. Peers are not only immediately accessible in the classroom, they can explain processes in ways that are accessible to another. Nuthall (2007) found that that a considerable amount of what children learn (some 25%) happens during peer interaction and thus the social dimension of classrooms influences what children know. Peers are often the best scaffolders of new material as their grasp of the ideas or techniques are usually not too far in advance of the child in need of assistance. However, this assumes that children seek the help they need when they in fact require it, which may or may not be the case. It also assumes

that peers' explanations are understood by the receiver and whether he or she has the chance to act upon these (Paratore, 1997). Moreover, it assumes that peers do not merely take over and tell a child what to do rather than model ways to solve problems. Further challenges in the interpersonal realm during conjoint learning are the pitfalls of conformity, peer acceptance and status positions. Feedback children give to each other can be influenced by friendship groupings and maintaining positions of status. For example, they may not challenge or correct a child who is popular, or they may defer to the evaluation of a peer even when that advice/suggestion is not helpful or illuminating. There is a large body of research on group work and peer feedback which can address some of these concerns (see e. g., Boud, 1994; Kutnick & Rogers, 1994), discussion of which is beyond the scope of this paper. Suffice to say that peer interaction can facilitate learning just as it can block learning and thus, processes need to be devised that optimise the educative effects and mitigate the problems.

## *Conclusion*

Those classrooms that foster learning as a dynamic, participatory process encourage a seamless and dynamic relationship between teacher and students, and between students themselves. The implications of this are not without its challenges. There are challenges and limitations in terms of teachers' pedagogical content knowledge, the demands of curriculum coverage, the engagement of all children, the ways in which peers interact with each other, and the need for alone time. It is the dance between the individual and the social contexts that enhance learning; not one at the expense of the other. Teachers' ability to discern the timing and transitions for both provide responsive, flexible contexts for learning.

What we do question is the cost of the shift in focus to individual outcomes and achievement away from process, negotiation, and shared endeavours. Progressive education is not dead thanks to the creativity and responsiveness of good teachers, but it is at serious risk as individual achievement aligned to external standards, and narrow prescriptive curricula focused on numeracy and literacy serve to constrain child centred learning. As Lowe (2007) observed, schooling has shifted from an emphasis on the experience of

learning for students to the achievement of external measurable outcomes. Both he and Beane recognise that schools are becoming one more product in a consumer market place and increasingly managed by “authoritarian mechanisms needed to control young people and their teachers” (Beane, 2005, p. 133). In contrast, teachers who continue to encourage shared social endeavours honour learning in all its unpredictable and profitable flux. They also provide spaces to work with students in ways that foster a range of learning possibilities. Dewey himself warned of the need to avoid false dichotomies: traditional versus progressive; individual versus social; theory versus practice. What he challenged us to consider is what is truly educative? The divide between policy makers and progressive education risks alienating teachers from their most effective and intuitive selves.

### *Acknowledgements*

This project was funded through the Teaching and Learning Research Initiative, administered by the New Zealand Council of Educational Research. All photographs and data have informed consent for reproduction in publications.

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# What Is a Poem Good For?

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# Possibilities

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## *Abstract*

I often hear the question, Is it a good poem? I think we should ask, What is a poem good for? In order to respond to this question, I read two books of poems a day for seven days—a total of fourteen books—an eclectic meandering in words. This essay is not intended to be a defense of poetry. Instead, I am eager to bear witness to poetry, to invite a conversation with poets I have lingered with, to remind us that poets are pursuing their art and living with keen desire. In this essay I ruminate on fourteen possibilities for responding to the question, What is a poem good for?

I seek to understand and support the inner life of educators – my own and others – in poetry. I read and write and teach poetry because I hold to a long commitment to the efficacy of poetry for transforming our hearts, imaginations, intellects, conversations, and communities. I promote a curriculum of poetry as a curriculum of possibility. Nevertheless, like so many discussions about education and inner life (or spiritual or creative or emotional intelligence), I am frequently surprised by how much indifference, or even animosity, there is among other scholars and educators regarding poetry.

I often hear the question, Is it a good poem? I think we should ask, What is a poem good for? So, I recently decided to read a collection of poetry books with a focus on the question, What is a poem good for? I read two books of poems a day for seven days—a total of fourteen books—an eclectic meandering in words, a walking here and there. These books were all on my study shelves, picked up at bookstores, gifts from friends. Some had been waiting a few years for me to find them.

There are many reasons why we don't read poetry. Often poetry is perceived as difficult, even incomprehensible, perhaps irrelevant. Poetry invites savoring when a consumerist culture eats quickly. Certainly poetry resists binary oppositions, sound bites, newspaper headlines, and flare stories. Perhaps poetry is failing to speak to our world. Perhaps our imaginations are atrophied, or perhaps poetry fails to move readers, to conjure up connections to place and people and home and lived stories.

As I read the fourteen books, I realized that I did not necessarily like all the poems. At least, I did not resonate with every poem in every book. I felt a little guilty about my responses. I very much liked some poems but not others. It seemed like a good idea to compose a playlist of favourite poems and especially favourite lines. While I liked some poets more than others, I enjoyed something from all the poets. I don't think I can explain why I liked some poems and poets. For example, in *Breath Takes Douglas Barbour* (2001) often writes for a small circle of like-minded friends. These are not poems that can be shared with many folk I know. And I expected to like *Trapeze* by Deborah Digges (2004) more than I did. In my initial reading so

few of her poems resonated for me. I wondered if I was just tired. I felt few connections. Later when I returned to the book, I found poems that I thought were very powerful, and I can't remember why I expressed initial disappointment.

This essay is intended to be more than a defense of poetry. Indeed, I am not so sure that I really want to defend poetry. Instead, I am eager to bear witness to poetry, to invite a conversation with poets I have lingered with, to spark a little enthusiasm perhaps among others, to remind all of us that poets are pursuing their art and living with keen desire. Patrick Lane (2004) professes in his memoir *There Is a Season*: "I know the only thing that kept me going, the only thing that kept me alive, was poetry" (p. 201). Can poetry change the world? Is poetry constructed in schools in ways that make it arcane, privileged, isolated, and esoteric? Do only poets read poetry? What is a poem good for?

In *Why Poetry Matters* Jay Parini (2008) claims that the work of poets "teaches us how to live" (p. xiv). According to Parini, "poetry matters, and without it we can live only partially, not fully conscious of the possibilities (emotional and intellectual) that life affords" (p. xiv). For Parini the poet quickens "our sense of life" by quickening "our sense of language" (p. 38). So, in this essay I ruminate on fourteen possibilities for responding to the question, what is a poem good for? In my ruminations I am not attempting to be definitive; I am only eager to continue a conversation that is ongoing, perhaps more subdued at times than I wish.

In this essay I hope to compose a performative text that will be both poetic and full of poetry. I invite the reader to read this essay like a long poem, to see with the eyes of the heart, and to hear with ears that are attuned to resonances and silences, and to linger with language and memory and hope. Above all, I invite readers to linger with the questions that poets raise and the truthful and courageous ways that they offer their wisdom with humility and hope. And because I am a professor of education, I also hope that readers will consider how the work of poets is akin to the work of educators, and how poets can inform the complex and challenging daily lived experiences that compose the practices and ethics and politics of school experience.

*Poets remind.*

In *Concrete and Wild Carrot* Margaret Avison (2002) reminds us:

Part of a celebration  
is to discover  
patience? and how  
painful hope can be? (p.9)

And by reminding us, poets teach us how to live. Avison is priestly and prophetic—always overtly Christian. She is also demanding—only somewhat accessible. Her poems are invitations to close hermeneutic readings:

They say it's wrong to  
push a parable.  
Figures of speech are still  
themselves responsible for  
their tendrils—though these stray.  
Words have their life too, won't  
compact into a theorem. (p.14)

Avison reminds us that our stories and myths are inexhaustible, always open to more interpretations, never closed and finished:

Many speak languages  
I've never learned. (p.22)

In Avison's wisdom, there is the reminder that we communicate in language, but our knowledge is always limited. For all her Christian testimony, Avison holds fast to the agnostic's conviction that we cannot know:

There's too much  
of us for us to know. (p.51)

Because we cannot know, we need to live boldly amidst the concrete and the wild, always aware that we are located in safe places that seek to domesticate our wildness:

Break out! Break from all safe  
comprehensive arrangements  
never completely comprehended by  
controllers or controlled. (p. 79)

Avison remains steadfastly convinced about the power of language to shape our lives:

Ink on white paper keeps informing those  
who learn, to listen long, until there glows  
within the friendly signs of being understood. (p. 67)

But Avison reminds us constantly about the mysteries of language, the unknowability of words, the challenges of communicating and understanding:

Words are  
imparted, able to calm,  
quick to wrestle—and best;  
they map a long long travelling  
beyond experience even. (p. 69)

This “long long travelling/beyond experience” is the heart of Avison’s wisdom for living well in words and in the world. She asks:

Where is the holy  
vanishing-point  
where life began and daily may  
bring us alive  
again? (pp. 38-39)

What is a poem good for? Avison's poetry breathes with a hopeful reminder:

There will begin,  
perhaps, a slow  
secret, gradual, germinating  
in the darkness. (p. 81)

2

*Poets see.*

In *The Alchemy of Happiness* Bowering (2003) claims:

Death is of no consequence,  
because there is eternity. (p. 118)

While a reader certainly does not have to agree with Bowering's conviction that death is not consequential because "there is eternity," at least the poet is willing to raise the hope, to hold out the possibility. In doing so, Bowering honours how daily lived experience is always infused and transfused with the sacred. Her confession, "my heart is hammered to metal" (p. 76), defies specious sentimentality and romantic delusions. Poets are seers, shamans, and wise people.

And for me, none are wiser than Mary Oliver (1992):

When it's over, I want to say: all my life  
I was a bride married to amazement.  
I was the bridegroom, taking the world into my arms. (p. 10)

Like Oliver, "I don't want to end up simply having visited this world" (p. 11). So, I embrace with heartfelt conviction Oliver's challenging question:

Tell me, what is it you plan to do  
with your one wild and precious life? (p. 94)

From a pedagogical and curricular perspective, I do not think there is a more significant question for contemporary education. I have been in schools all my life, either as a student or a teacher. I have read widely about the philosophy and practices of education, and I have written extensively about my concerns and hopes. But now that I am a grandfather to two delightful granddaughters, Madeleine and Mirabelle, I am even more energetically seeking to re-imagine schools as places where my granddaughters will be supported, guided, and nurtured. What would a school be like where students, teachers, administrators, staff, and parents began each day with Oliver's question:

Tell me, what is it you plan to do  
with your one wild and precious life? (p. 94)

3

### *Poets reveal.*

In *Closer to Home* Derk Wynand (1997) writes about growing old as “each year refusing harder to leave” (p. 15). Poets open up the simple ordinary event in extraordinary ways. What often transmutes the ordinary is the poet's characteristic way of being both playful and profound. Poets write about the seemingly commonplace, the ordinary, with the kind of whimsical delight that reminds us to attend to the extraordinary. Wynand does not shy away from tough questions, from exploring the places that need exploring:

Of course, it's impossible. When I point the ants' behaviour out to you, you complain that it's not at all what you needed to see or know. What *that* might be, however, you do not mention. (p. 35)

Poets like Wynand reveal mystery by investigating and interrogating the commonplace:

Deity in diapers –  
wow! This theology we thought we could live with! (p. 56)

As Oliver (1992) understands, “We hope for magic; mystery endures” (p. 240). Poets are committed to revealing our lives and possibilities for living, but in the very act of revealing, poets know that much will always remain concealed. That is the heart of mystery. So, revelation is a way of reminding us to revel in all that is. Mystery is everywhere.

Now that I am growing old, now that I have already lived far more life than I will ever live again, I am caught up in Wendell Berry’s (1998) surprise about how quickly a life passes:

The young man leaps, and lands  
on an old man’s legs. (p. 169)

Lorna Crozier (2002) in *Apocrypha of Light* evokes the creative power of poetry for revealing and honouring mystery:

and everything Adam couldn’t name  
fell into poetry and silence (p. 22)

How can we nurture in the young an openness to mystery, to all that cannot be named, to the wonderful poetics of silence?

4

### *Poets listen.*

Poets honour the power of naming, the mystery of language. Above all, poets teach us how to attend to language. In her astonishing book *Alphabet Inger* Christensen (2000) claims:

there’s no more  
to say; we kill  
more than we think  
more than we know  
more than we feel;  
there’s no more  
to say; we hate;  
there is no more (p. 41)

Nevertheless, for all her claims that “there’s no more/to say” Christensen dances wildly in the mysteries of the alphabet and the limitless possibilities of language to convince us that there is always more. Like Wynand (1997) acknowledges:

Words catch  
on air and tangle into long phrases,  
the phrases themselves tangling  
on one another. (p. 74)

In *Breath Takes* Douglas Barbour (2001) explores the entanglements of language with bold innovation:

desiring *against* lyric hearing  
all those voices (p. 32)

And what voices! Full of erotic rhythms:  
a story told over & over it is so simple &  
it refuses to enter discourse courses thru yr body (p. 26)

And because the rhythms course through the body, we need:

mouth to mouth re citation  
burrowing in to where bodies rime (p. 40)

Barbour understands how difficult it is to listen, but this is the poet’s wisdom:

hearing that harder lesson  
is what the poems deeply tell (p. 62)

I am currently on study leave, and I am learning to listen in ways I have not practiced for a long time. My life always seems so busy—like I need to be somewhere else, attending to something else, listening to somebody else. On study leave, I am learning to be present, in the moment, attentive to the person I am with. I am learning to hear with the body; I am learning to hear resonances and rhythms that cannot be contained in the literal structures of syntax and semantics. I am no longer listening only so I can interpret what has been spoken,

especially so I can then paraphrase what has been spoken, and return it with a self-satisfied grin that I have cracked a code like Intrepid, the counter-intelligence spy. Instead, I am learning to listen so I know I do not have the answers, to honour the mystery of language and grammar and meaning as always bountifully beyond control, but still dynamically connected to the heart of human communication and community.

5

### *Poets remember.*

In Trapeze Deborah Digges (2004) writes:

Nor is remembering like taking a book down from the shelf to find old keepsakes fluttering out. (p. 11)

In a similar way in Falsework Gary Geddes (2007) admits: “I wanted the story, in all its contradictory detail” (p. 92). In lyrical and prose poems Geddes presents a narrative of the collapse of the Second Narrows Bridge in Vancouver during construction on June 17, 1958. Geddes calls his story in poetry “a polyphonic narrative, a series of diverse voices reflecting that event and its aftermath” (p. 13). The reader is offered glimpses and echoes and lyrical resonances:

I was listening for the voices of men who built the bridge, the survivors and those lost. More than that, the blood that beats in language. It disappears so easily. Business, urgency, self, they destroy song as readily as they cheapen story. (p. 39)

Geddes’ father was a deep-sea diver who went into the wreck looking for bodies, and so Falsework is a sequence of poems about the collapse of the bridge as well as about the relationship of the son and the father:

... father, this man I worshipped but hardly knew, preparing his final descent, this time into the earth. True or false, I still can’t say. However, as if by magic, and from the grave itself, he has once again managed

to write me into his story, a bridge, a tenuous rope of narrative, along which I am moving, cautiously, one foot placed carefully in front of the other, every muscle, every breath contributing to my precarious balance. (p. 123)

Not only does Geddes narrate the historical event of the collapse of the Second Narrows Bridge in Vancouver, but by focusing much of his story on the memories of his father, Geddes also reminds us how historical, political, and economic experiences are all, always, inextricably connected to the personal. The catastrophe of the collapse of the bridge is movingly evoked and critically examined in Geddes' poetry, but the catastrophe is located in the stories of individuals who must not be forgotten, who cannot be forgotten. In Geddes' poetic narration, there are no facile explanations. Instead, Geddes calls up some people and events and emotions so we do not forget where we have come from and who has gone before us.

All this careful and creative remembering resonates with Wendell Berry's (1998) wise understanding:

Out of disordered history  
a little coherence, a pattern  
comes, like the steadying  
of a rhythm on a drum... (p. 46)

6

*Poets startle.*

In *Covenant of Salt*, full of lyrical light and narrative images, Robin McGrath (2005) writes about the whale that swallowed the reluctant Hebrew prophet Jonah: "I'm sure that whale has stories of its own" (p. 3). Poets tell alternative stories, especially the silent and silenced stories. Poets remind us to look at stories from multiple perspectives. McGrath writes about young Innu committing suicide in Labrador:

The war is here now,  
One step closer to home. (p. 41)

McGrath is not afraid to confront both terror and tears:

A haystack of needles wasn't enough  
To sew up the hole she had left in his life (p. 68)

She reminds us that “we are all poets at times” (p. 43), and she invites us to learn:

Tears for the lost language,  
The geography of the heart. (p. 52)

This “geography of the heart” is a complex, even inexhaustible, affair. McGrath (2005) poignantly describes the guidelines for teaching and learning cursive writing:

Learning to write cursive.  
The directions read like an erotic poem (p. 7)

As I consider my own experiences with learning cursive writing, I remember mostly the challenges of getting it right, the fruitless effort to avoid smudges while writing with a fountain pen, the relentless sense that my handwriting was always plain and chunky, failing to flow with undulating curves. I wish I could have practiced cursive writing as one more experience of eros, of embodied inloveness with the world and with words. I wish I had experienced the erotic in learning to write inside parallel lines. And I wish I had experienced the kind of embodied engagement and wonder that Geddes (2007) conjures as the steelworkers walk the narrow lines of construction beams:

I could feel the angels  
brush my shoulders as I walked  
the beams. We knew our business. (p. 27)

Like many poets, McGrath and Geddes honour the wonder that is inherent or inherited in all human experiences, or at least the wonder that needs to be acknowledged. Poets startle us out of our eagerness to take for granted the gifts of wonder that shape us.

7

### *Poets imagine.*

What would school experience be like if we focused on imagination? My granddaughter Madeleine who is almost three years old reminds me constantly that her world is both rooted in the day-to-day adventures of family and daycare and meals and routines for bathtime and bedtime and rooted in an expansive imagination informed by books and princesses, Disney and Dora, play and questions. Madeleine's world attends to images of the real and the reality of imagination. With her infatuation with words, Madeleine reminds me of Avison's (2002) claim:

Words are  
imparted, able to calm,  
quick to wrestle—and best;  
they map a long long travelling  
beyond experience even. (p. 69)

Poets offer us words that enable us to “map a long long travelling.” By embracing imagination as a fecund way to know, poets call us beyond the limits of nation to explore the limitless possibilities of imagination. Lorna Crozier (2002) writes about “the sun’s glossolalia on blades of grass” (p. 7). For Crozier, texts are everywhere, inviting literate engagement and enthusiastic response:

Surely Babel will forever mean  
the radiance and candour of the word. (p. 27)

How can we as educators celebrate constantly “the radiance and candour” of the word Babel, a word that is often rendered synonymous with chaos and misunderstanding and punishment

for human hubris? How can we hold fast to the young child's daily experience of imaginative engagement with language, with the wild wonder of words? This is the work of poets.

Crozier (2002) imagines the beginning:

In the mornings of that lost  
and long ago beginning,  
nothing broken  
or in need of breaking. (p. 6)

And Barbour (2001) imagines the complex dialectic between lost and found that pulses in the flow of human stories:

so much is lost & yet so much  
is found (p. 59)

Poets offer no simple philosophy or theology for understanding existence and experience. Instead, poets call us to imagination and re-imagination, to how our stories are like a Moebius strip that acknowledges and presages beginnings and endings while, at the same time, rejecting beginnings and endings as too facile solutions for what cannot be solved or resolved. In spare, vivid images, Deborah Digges (2004) conjures tangled places that defy simple dichotomies:

Sparrows sailed the barn's doomed girth, forsaken,  
therefore free. They lit on rafters crossing the west windows  
that flared at sunset like a furnace fed on stars. (p. 4)

8

*Poets tease.*

In *The Wife's Account* Esta Spalding (2002) turns a poetic spotlight on fantastic, quirky, witty, sad moments:

People drive here from Florida to see  
bears & we go to Florida to see  
alligators.

People in minivans crisscrossing  
the continent, making lists of exotic licence plates. (pp. 24-25)

Poets are always poking and prodding, playing with words, interrogating orthodoxies, asking what lurks behind the screen or around the corner. Poets are characteristically curious, politically prophetic, comically conscientious, pedagogically passionate. Most poets are tendentious teases who challenge social shibboleths and cultural conventions and political partisanship. And in all their prodding and poking, poets especially challenge the social, cultural, and political construction of art itself. In her characteristic voice of eloquent conviction Avison (2002) calls out for a democratic defusing of cultural constructions of art that only separate art from people:

Forget the elegant speeches,  
the unbreakable delicacy  
or cello resonance of  
'art'. (p. 77)

I am especially impressed with Avison's conviction because I think Avison's poetry is typically characterized by 'elegant speeches,/ the unbreakable delicacy/ or cello resonance of/ 'art' (77). Poets tease by lingering in the places of contradiction, ambiguity, tension, and uncertainty. From a pedagogical perspective, these seem like the kind of places that we need to explore in our encounters with teaching and learning.

Out of her intriguingly humorous perspective on contemporary life, Spalding (2002) then asks the profoundly foundational question that most of us confront most days, perhaps every day:

What are we going to do  
with this love? (p. 76)

She concludes:

We're tied to each other.  
Where you climb, I will  
climb. This light, ungraspable, all we have. (p. 76)

Poets offer glimpses. There is always so much (more) I want to know. Poets tease. Perhaps this is what is possible. Perhaps this is what I need.

9

### *Poets question.*

Poets ask questions and let the answers come when they might. In *O Ciudadán* Erín Moure (2002) asks:

Is there an originary marking? If there were, would we be able to 'read' it at all? Or does such a 'trait' receive its function as mark only from our reading, our imposition of acculturated being that takes place in reading's gesture. And is thereby not 'originary.' (p. 20)

I confess that I do not know how to read Moure. In many ways I find her illegible. I have read many of the philosophers she has read, but her poetry fills me with confusion. I wonder who can read Moure. And, yet, of all the fourteen books I read in seven days, Moure's *O Ciudadán* is the one that tantalizes and enchants me most tenaciously. She leaves me hanging, full of questions, less confident that the answers are available, anywhere, certainly not at the back of the textbook. Like her fecund phrase "Contiguous without absorption" (19), I come alongside Moure's poetry, but I do not absorb her language, and in turn I know that I have not been absorbed by the poetry. Somehow this contiguity without absorption sustains our abiding otherness.

When Moure writes, "The birth of laughter was the essay" (p. 5), I can only ask, What does this mean? I don't know, and no investment of my reader's plodding patience or plucky perseverance has yet

been rewarded with a dividend of understanding. I grasp Moure's contention that "Without locality there is no sensibility" (p. 7), but I grasp it like a sea wreck survivor glad to hold on to any fragment that will keep me afloat. When I linger with the following words, I know only that I cannot win the bet, especially since I have no idea what the bet is, or who has placed it, or where it has been placed:

The new wall we built that year  
where the house side had been torn out

Grammar we called in

like a bet on narrative (p. 10)

So, poets not only question with quizzical longing, but they invite readers on an unquenchable quest of questioning, too. Like Mary Oliver (1992) knows, the questions are not paths to answers:

That summer I hurried too, wakened  
To books and music and circling philosophies.  
I sat in the kitchen sorting through volumes of answers  
That could not solve the mystery of the trees. (p. 235)

10

### *Poets pray.*

Poets live with a reverence for life. As I read the eclectic collection of fourteen poetry books, chosen in a random way from books that were waiting on my study shelves, I was surprised to hear so many echoes of spirituality. I did not choose the books because I anticipated a spiritual focus in the poetry; I was surprised by how frequently poets address experiences of the spirit and prayer and reverence. Digges (2004) understands how "You can have a good life and not know it" (p. 28). In *Timbered Choir* Wendell Berry (1998) has collected poems like prayers that were composed after spending many Sunday mornings in the practice of walking meditation.

In the long poetic tradition, especially of poets connected with the enduring Romantic movement, including Samuel Taylor Coleridge, William Wordsworth, and Ralph Waldo Emerson, Berry's "poems were written in silence, in solitude, mainly out of doors" (p. xvii).

Poets pray and meditate. Poets attend to silence and solitude. Mary Oliver lives prayerfully in the midst of questions, uncertainty, faithfulness, and anticipation:

... though the questions  
that have assailed us all day  
remain—not a single  
answer has been found—  
walking out now  
into the silence and the light  
under the trees,  
and through the fields,  
feels like one. (p. 151)

Poets acknowledge the inner life is ecologically connected to the outer life, but they challenge simplistic relationships of priority and value. Berry writes, "though I am happy to think that poetry may be reclaiming its public life, I am equally happy to insist that poetry also has a private life that is more important to it and necessary to us" (p. xvii). But as a poet and public intellectual, Berry knows that "a poem can be a way of saying something of public interest in public: a way of making an argument, of declaring one's allegiance, of taking a stand" (p. xvii).

And in his poetry and essays, Berry takes a stand, clearly, unequivocally, and eloquently:

Renewed, as in a rhyme.  
This is no human vision  
Subject to our revision;  
God's eye holds every leaf as light is worn. (p. 11)

Poets are not proselytizers, pundits, or preachers. Instead poets call us to prayer as one more way of knowing how everybody and everything is connected, how we are all responsible for ourselves and for one another. Above all, our responsibility is to interrogate the possibilities of concepts like inner life and outer life as we learn how to respond to ourselves and to one another.

11

Poets hope.

While hope is a theme in all fourteen books of poems I read in seven days, hope is most courageously and creatively explored in Patrick Friesen's (1997) *A Broken Bowl*. As I read Friesen's poetry I heard echoes of ancient Hebrew psalmists and prophets, now rendered in contemporary contexts and voices. Friesen confesses:

it's taking forever  
but I'm learning to speak  
once again (p. 16)

And we can be glad he is "learning to speak/once again" because his voice is profound and powerful:

it is impossible to be good  
only shame and desolation move in the world  
only betrayal and rage (p. 32)

Friesen's words are not easy to embrace. He challenges common cultural practices:

reading newspapers  
between the lies  
information horoscopes and ads  
and an endless fascination  
for the lurid deaths of stars and saints (p. 43)

And he insists on attending to horrible and inhumane stories. He will not hide from the harshness of history:

this century's poems  
conjuring words  
names and places  
sarajevo  
auschwitz  
soweto  
these incantations  
like train cars clicking by (p. 47)

But Friesen looks long and hard at the dark night of human history because he still holds fast to the hope for an alternative vision or version. So, on the one hand, he writes relentlessly about the broken bowl:

there  
where God lies beneath rubble  
where the bowl is broken (p. 109)

But, still, he writes about the broken bowl with brave clarity because he will not surrender hope, or at least the hope for hope:

hope  
that somewhere  
sun-blached  
amongst the wreckage  
something clean

something still left  
some last good in us (p. 131)

Perhaps all poetry, of all places and times, could be read as a hope for "something still left/some last good in us."

## *Poets linger.*

Etymologically, the words school and scholar are derived from a Greek word that means leisure employed in learning. As a scholar who has spent his whole life in schools, I am frequently nonplussed about how little leisure has ever been employed in my learning. Instead, I have many memories of running from one task to another, of bells and timetables, of deadlines and late nights (especially drinking coffee and eating donuts), of examinations and report cards. As I look back on a long life in school, I remember little leisure employed in learning. Instead, I think I have been hyperactive, competitive, obsessive, driven!

Poets advocate the necessity for lingering. As a poet, I have written about living poetically, and about lingering in the moment, and about listening to the heart, but I must confess that I have not been very successful. Even now on study leave, I find that I can't write fast enough, must always check e-mail, must attend to a dozen tasks at once. I have much to learn if I hope to learn to linger. I want to be like Mary Oliver (1992) who confesses:

When it's over, I want to say: all my life  
I was a bride married to amazement.  
I was the bridegroom, taking the world into my arms. (p. 10)

When I hold my granddaughters in my arms, I know abiding amazement and astonishment. I want to linger with them, but how am I going to learn to shut off the inertia-driven momentum of years spent seeking a perfect score, represented by the letter A, never the letter Z, and the teacher's pat on the head when I probably needed a kick in the arse? What is the restlessness that rustles and wrestles relentlessly in my body and spirit?

If I linger with Margaret Avison (2002), I might learn that the poet's wisdom lies in the practice of writing itself:

Ink on white paper keeps informing those  
who learn, to listen long, until there glows  
within the friendly signs of being understood. (p. 67)

Perhaps in this moment of writing these words, I am learning to linger. Perhaps I need to learn how to write without looking over my shoulder for the teacher, the reviewer, the editor, or the publisher. Perhaps I just need to write the words, to tarry and dwell with the words. Perhaps I will nurture well-being by learning to dwell in being in this moment of writing these words.

13

### *Poets love.*

Poets write about emotions, about the heart, about longing, and they do so in language that helps us see and know and feel in enhanced ways. In *The Alchemy of Happiness* Marilyn Bowering (2003) writes about her father: “he fills the cauldron of my failed heart with his love” (p. 3), and about her mother, she writes: “the well of your love/ is my water” (p. 5). Bowering reminds me to confess my love, and to profess my love. She teaches me that “the alchemy of happiness” is understanding “the great gift/of being loved” (p. 3).

Poets narrate love with hope and specificity. Wendell Berry (1998) is committed to doing “the work of love” (p. 163). In *Timbered Choir* he claims:

I would not have been a poet  
except that I have been in love  
alive in this mortal world. (p. 182)

I fear all strong emotion, including love. Yet, as a poet I live consciously and constantly in my emotions. I am always seeking to live with love, and that means living emotionally with my feelings in motion and commotion. But who can I share these emotions with? Who can receive the intensity of these emotions? So many educators fear strong emotion, especially because it is so easy to slip into sentiment and cliché.

Poets explore love. The word preposition is derived from *prae* (before) and *ponere* (to place). A preposition is a word of relating and relation. A preposition connects elements of a sentence. Prepositions are generally taken for granted. Poets remind us to be aware of prepositions, with attention to the ways that prepositions position subjects and objects. Prepositions keep things in motion, unstable, and mobile. Prepositions signify acting, relating, and connecting. Nothing is frozen. The pose or position or place of a preposition is not stable. It is always a fecund place. In the English language there are fifty-one prepositions. Imagine just some of the possibilities of connections between love and poetry: poetry about love; poetry after love; poetry despite love; poetry during love; poetry for love; poetry from love; poetry in love; poetry inside love; poetry into love; poetry like love; poetry of love; poetry on love; poetry outside love; poetry past love; poetry since love; poetry till love; poetry to love; poetry through love; poetry throughout love; poetry until love; poetry with love; poetry within love; poetry without love.

I admire Barbour's (2001) conviction:

ancient discourse this core dis  
covery of 'love' always 'as if' (p. 30)

I am reminded of the word littoral—a coastal region, a shore, a region between the limits of high and low tide. As I consider the words littoral and literal, I realize that I am always seeking the places where words wash in and out. What is the sturdy shore that I seek to walk? Perhaps it is the path of love. Perhaps I am seeking to walk an invisible line that only unfolds as I lay the letters down, throwing letters into the air, and then jumping from one to another. Perhaps the only sureness I can know as a shore is in the writing that lives and loves.

*Poets connect.*

As I read all fourteen poets, I was struck again and again by the many connections that I experienced with them. I know none of the poets personally. I have never met any of them. I have seen their images and heard a few read in public presentations, but, nevertheless, I felt a strong sense of connection and relationship to all of them, as if we were all part of a network that is ecologically connected through ideas and emotions and experiences and hopes.

Gary Geddes (2007) writes about bridges as a significant kind of connecting:

The bridge  
is a *metaphor*. From the Greek  
metaphore, meaning  
to transfer, to bear across,  
in this case cars, information,  
us, one shore to another. (p. 43)

As these poets write about the intimate and the public, the personal and the political, the local and the global, the individual and the universal, the I and the you, I experience a keen sense of connection that is familiar, even familial, ordinary and extraordinary, parochial and expansive. I experience an abiding sense of being grounded, not isolated or solitary, but connected to an existence that cannot be contained in the limits of chronology, ideology, history, identity, and culture. In the etymological understanding of poem (from the Greek poiein, to make), the poet is a maker. In Geddes' words, the poet is a builder of bridges.

Margaret Avison (2002) admits:

Many speak languages  
I've never learned (p. 22)

And, yet, even in the midst of the many languages “I’ve never learned,” I still feel a sense of connection with these poets and the people and places they write about. In the midst and mystery of our countless differences, poets remind, see, reveal, listen, remember, startle, imagine, tease, question, pray, hope, linger, love, and connect. What is a poem good for? That is a question best asked while reading poems, while lingering with poems, while engaging in the conversations that poems invite, while writing poems, while sharing poems with one another.

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# Schools without walls:



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# creative endeavor and disengaged young people

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## *Abstract:*

The authors draw on their experiences as educators, creative artists and arts education facilitators to examine intercultural collaboration with young people from marginalized communities, individuals often labeled as ‘at risk’ or vulnerable youth. In this article, we reject these terms as limiting and externally-defined; we challenge notions of marginalised young people as non-compliant, and prefer instead the use of ‘engaged’ and ‘disengaged’ to describe the practices (and not the identities) of young people who at times (productively) opt out of mainstream opportunities and projects. This article examines the ways in which neoliberal devaluing of arts education (Eisner 2002) parallels the devaluing and marginalizing practices of those young people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds and communities, and highlights the urgency of increasing the social capital of practitioners, participants and methodologies in arts education.

*Keywords: young people, disengaged, community arts, arts education*

## *Productive Risk and Creativity: the Value of Not-Knowing*

While research on arts methods for re-engaging young people both within and outside of schools is growing, Australian and other education systems seem to be moving inexorably away from indications that arts-based methods are good for both the kids and for schools (Sefton-Green and Soep, 2007; O'Brien & Donelan, 2008; Greene, 2001). While such research highlights the frustratingly 'little regard for the formal educational systems' (O'Toole and O'Mara, 2007, p. 208) some findings seem to demonstrate, here we examine some rich community-based education projects which may suggest alternative possibilities that can be adapted back into schools.



*Figure 1:  
still image from  
Still Waiting, 2009,  
Anne Harris*

This article draws on two projects for its discussion of arts education methods, both of them outside of literal schools but not beyond pedagogical contexts: Youthworx Media in Brunswick, Victoria, and the ethnocinematic video project Cross-Marked: Sudanese Australian Young Women Talk Education, which used film-based collaboration to explore and promote the views of Sudanese Australian young women's experiences of secondary schooling in Australia. While most would agree that the communicative values of creative engagement 'becomes the incomparable organ of instruction', (Fordon, 2000, p.10) it is seen perhaps most clearly in current Australian culture by young people from

refugee backgrounds who (despite a flurry of recent research) remain at risk of falling through educational cracks; these young people struggle on multiple sites including culturally, socially, and linguistically, yet they are increasingly thriving in the arts. Both Youthworx and Cross-Marked recognize these areas of proficiency and seek to assist these young people to capitalize upon them.

Youthworx is a socially inclusive media project that has the primary goal of engaging homeless and disadvantaged youth in a process of participation and development that reconnects them to their communities through transformative, supported creative learning, focused primarily around film and radio production and including accredited training in Certificate I, II, and III in Creative Industries and Media. Cross-Marked: Sudanese Australian Young Women Talk Education was a creative and participatory doctoral research project conducted through Victoria University, similarly a socially inclusive media project that has the primary goal of re-engaging young people who felt underserved by the mainstream education system. This article will examine these complementary projects within the body of an internationally advancing arts education discourse, and finally will reflect on some possible ways forward within Australia.

## *Context*

The long history of those working to re-centralise arts education in curriculum development and delivery echo our observations as artists and educators, and mirror the ‘risky business’ (O’Brien & Donelan, 2007) agenda of those using arts for learners in the margins. Such efforts to integrate both arts and marginalized learners can be seen in curriculum development outside of Australia, including the US, and which ‘bear a striking similarity to efforts in the field to connect other marginalized discourses, for example, multicultural education, to disciplines that are more highly prized in the schools’ (Korn-Bursztyn, 2005, p. 46). These efforts include collaborative community/school programs like the Teacher Education Collaborative (TEC) of the Lincoln Center Institute (New York), and the growing movement of schools without walls.

Wilson (2003) proposes a blasting apart of curriculum which encompasses not only linguistic but visual and other forms of communication. Citing an increasingly rhizomatic wave in education (and contemporary culture), and drawing on the American notion of schools without walls, Wilson proposes that a contemporary pedagogy which is 'fully submitting to the new and popular' (p. 214) and which moves 'pedagogy to a space situated between conventional...school curricular content and content from contemporary art and popular [visual] culture,' (p. 214) provides a way for 'teachers and students to collaboratively embrace dynamic changes and expansions of content' (p. 214), and which may offer one fruitful way forward, where lines between public and pedagogical spaces/relationships/languages productively blur.

Both authors have seen similar trends while working in these multiple contexts and formats with young people from marginalized positionalities. This paper examines the nature of creativity and the role it can play in constructive and creative risk taking and engagement across vast divides of time / space / relationship / language. Risk and creativity go hand in hand, and clearly no single methodology will hold traction in every environment. This article and these projects reflect this interdisciplinarity, but there are nevertheless commonalities that in our experience can begin to facilitate this movement toward engagement, creativity and its possible by-products, including increased social and cultural capital.

There is nothing new about schools (or community programs) in which 'the arts belonged to everyone' (Beer 2001, p.1), and this article is not suggesting that educators at all levels do not recognise this; however, in more recent times, institutions in a neoliberal context are even less rich in 'time, belief, and a staff committed and enthusiastic' (2001, p.1) enough to teach or collaborate creatively. Discourses within the academy continue to highlight the ways in which creative approaches are increasingly seen as theoretically legitimate and methodologically sound (O'Toole 2009). Developments in interdisciplinary and qualitative research over the past two decades include formal and methodological innovations in ethnography (Ellis 2004; Ellis & Bochner 1996; Richardson 1997) and arts-based educational research (Barone & Eisner 1997) which indicate the ways

in which there is room for development, but also of the social capital this work carries in more mainstream society. Eisner most recently (2002) calls for assessment to shift toward evaluating process, rather than product. And yet, within schools and amongst particularly secondary teachers, room for the arts seems to be dwindling.

Extending Dewey (1980), Fordon tells us that “in both production and enjoyed perception of works of art, knowledge is transformed” (2000, p. 5) by creative methods in classrooms. Multiliteracies, creative approaches to critical literacy, and communicative language techniques in second language learning/teaching demonstrate the ways in which creativity and the arts are infusing what used to be known as ‘core’ subjects (in opposition to the ‘expendable’ subjects like arts). Yet when it comes to high school certificates and university entrance scores, the arts still fall away despite current research to the contrary (O’Toole & O’Mara 2007; O’Brien & Donelan, 2006, 2007; Eisner, 2002). Dewey’s notion of knowledge transformed still has little currency in the high-stakes arena of university entrance scores and computerised school ranking systems. Creative endeavour does not make claims of giving voice to the marginalized, but rather to “transforming and creating previous knowledge into new knowledge both at an intellectual and emotional level” (Fordon, p. 5). This creation of new knowledge is what hybrid projects like Youthworx and Cross-Marked seek to do.

### *Making space for collaboration:*

These two case studies highlight the ways in which young people can – when given the chance – actively re-engage within learning contexts. As creative teachers and practitioners know, no single methodology or context will work for collaborating with all young people – creative projects are context-specific. However, in both Cross-Marked and at Youthworx, we have found that the most successful starting point is deeply embedded in relationship and the young people’s own generative creativity. When Anne began discussing the idea of Cross-Marked... with her students in the western suburbs secondary school in which she taught, she found that Sudanese Australian young women were committed on many levels to advancing a project of this kind: politically, artistically, personally, and collaboratively.



*Figure 2:  
Youthworx studio,  
Jon Staley 2010.*

Ethnocinema requires that such projects put relationships first, and project development second, and Anne's role as a Drama, Media and English teacher laid the foundations for some of these relationships, and for the creative idea for the films to come from her students.

In early 2008, Anne began the first of the six films with her co-participant Lina Deng, and the project concluded in late 2009. In total, sixteen young women co-created seven films (six of the Sudanese young women and one of the researcher), and at some of the co-participants' request, they were placed on YouTube in late 2010. This possibility of research-as-popular-culture was one reason why some of the young women were keen to participate: the project had real world outcomes that they could easily share with family and friends. Lina – Anne's first collaborator - taught her a great deal about artmaking and about mutual exchange in intercultural collaboration, and Anne is deeply grateful to her for these lessons. They were both painful and rewarding, and the sharing of power and agency carved out a space for experimentation and socialisation:

*Anne:* How does it feel to be filming me instead of the other way around?

*Lina:* Feels good.

*Anne:* Does it feel more powerful?

*Lina:* Hell yeah!

*(Harris, 2009)*

Films made with this prioritisation of relationship are an extension of ethnographic documentary, a type of performance ethnography (Denzin, 2003) which has been gaining traction since the early 1980s. Ethnocinema can be characterised not only by the relationship between co-participants from different cultures, but by its commitment to anti-oppression, anti-objectification, and social justice aims. Even beyond other qualitative methods (such as ethnodrama or the vast array of performative social sciences), the subjects of ethnocinematic films may be objectified, ‘anthropologised’ and patronised by viewing communities who believe they are observing a ‘real’ look at a whole community; such is the legacy of traditional anthropology out of which ethnocinema is emerging (Marks 2000), and against which ethnocinematic practitioners continue to work by asserting that films made collaboratively are documents of relationship, and are not representative of whole communities, ‘authentic’ individuals, or unassailable ‘truths’; that they trouble the very notion of authenticity itself. Ethnocinema is a type of film, but even more it is a way of being together in a shared creative endeavour which documents a moment in time – a moment of intercultural meeting, understanding or indeed misunderstanding. St Denis encourages artists, educators and researchers to “work and collaborate across a multitude of differences, both within and outside our own communities” (St. Denis, 2007, p. 1087), and ethnocinema - and other arts-based projects such as Youthworx – aims to do these things.

By replicating traditional classrooms, we are likely to generate typical classroom behaviours. In establishing Youthworx Media in a disused factory space, Jon wanted to shape a space that blended an industry studio feel with a youth based education context. He wanted the space to be comfortable but not too comfortable, a space that was calm but vibrant and one that allowed for a range of different ways of working/thinking within it. Architects now actively advocate spatial flexibility in the design of learning centres and other public spaces, and acknowledge that often collaborating with “children as young as eleven years old produced the most effective design solution” (Dudek, 2005). Educators are no different: in this shared space of learning, collaborative solutions are stronger solutions. Similarly, Jon wanted

students entering Youthworx to experience a sense of lightness, ease and flexibility within the space but not make it so comfortable that they would feel tempted to (graffiti) tag the walls or furniture.

As Beard and Wilson state, “The pedagogy of space remains underdeveloped” (2006, pp. 80-81), a remarkable gap in the ever-expanding educational canon. As they remind us, western classrooms have remained essentially unchanged for over 100 years, despite our increasing awareness of the impact of physical contexts on emotional and intellectual performance. In resourcing Youthworx, Jon sought quality materials that reflected the value and importance of the young people and the creative work. For him, it was crucial that Youthworx did not replicate classrooms with rows of desks in which “the senses become dulled” (2006, p. 157); instead he opted to buy three plain light tables that could be configured together to create a central working space indicative of a more adult environment, creating a ‘learning space’ and avoiding outmoded ‘classroom’ configurations. To support creativity in a learning environment a blend of informal and formal space is required, including a range of different ways of experiencing the space that allows for different moments within the creative development process, a space that structurally supports the rhythm of creativity. At Youthworx, that requires a space that technically and structurally supports creative media development.

Youthworx is small but technically well resourced: a pod of nine large screen Mac computers, a well-equipped radio sound/recording studio and two high-quality video cameras. Structurally the space can blend a range of learning moments at any given time. The young people can rotate time throughout the day moving from the studio, to one of the computer editing suites, to the central meeting/work space for regular production meetings and general group class activities. The authors argue that space is one of the key ingredients in determining how rich and fertile our creative soil will be. With a space that structurally supports the creative process the seeds required to produce original, authentic content will be able to take hold with greater ease. Likewise if we have all the technical resources at our disposal but our space is arid and dry it will be far more difficult to facilitate creative engagement and production. Space that can support creative development technically, rhythmically, and kinaesthetically,

will greatly enhance our ability to facilitate relationships that generate creative engagement, unlike the constricting atmosphere that Anne felt might intrude on any authentic creative collaboration conducted in schools.

In approaching the work of intercultural filmmaking, Anne was adamant that schools were not going to be the most conducive sites for mutually collaborative work about education. She felt strongly as a community arts worker (and teacher) that schools' reliance on hierarchies of 'expertise' – although surmountable – were not (in this instance) the equal ground on which students and teachers might come together to creatively generate discussion about what might be improved. She also understood that as a teacher (even if not the co-participants' teacher), she would have to work hard to re-equalise the power dynamics between her own and her co-participants' different ages, races, and economic status. The attention to appropriate 'space' in creative endeavour has both literal and virtual embodiments, and continuous crossings-over: in *Cross-Marked*, Anne recognized that the need to establish a 'virtual space' of relationship between herself as filmmaker/researcher, and the young women in her project, was as crucial as the physical space of establishing alternative learning centres like Youthworx.

### *Reflections on practice: the fertile ground of creative collaboration*

All teachers and community artists are constantly challenged by the empty space, the productive 'pause', or even at times the chaos that precedes a commitment to an idea, or to action. Facilitating creative original work with young people takes time, allowing for moments of emptiness, shifts in momentum and flexibility to respond to surges in activity. This flexibility can be challenging in traditional classrooms, and in the face of traditional (and increasingly) standards-driven assessment. Eisner (2002) urges us to consider paradigmatic shifts which will allow such flexibility in both methodology and evaluation, from outcome-based to process-based. The seemingly contradictory notions of stability and flexibility are both, ironically, required in the way time is structured, managed and allowed to pass.

In the accredited training delivered at Youthworx that revolves primarily around live to air radio and filmmaking, most of the modules are delivered through integrated project-based learning. This allows for a rhythmic structure with plenty of space inside the way time is distributed, a necessity in seeking to generate original, creative work. To establish this rhythm and space within the delivery of the curriculum, Youthworx employs a fairly structured format whereby morning sessions involve group activities while afternoons are spent on production tasks. Mid-morning and mid afternoon sessions revolve around production development with students working on radio segments, recording music/segments in the studio, story/script development, filming and editing. Students have plenty of time to test out ideas internally or externally, plenty of time to play in the edit suite or studio without a 'teacher' constantly on their back. This flexible format allows for a great deal of self-directed learning while always having someone in the background who can provide 'expert' assistance. As Donelan (2009) has suggested, this style of arts collaboration-as-pedagogy provides opportunities for building social and cultural capital, and for establishing intercultural dialogue.

The authors and the young people that we work with understand that there is an inherent rhythm to the creative process that constitutes a series of ebbs and flows, ups and downs, peaks and valleys, moments of great energy and excitement and moments of emptiness and uncertainty; it was their classroom teachers who often were not able to maintain the faith in these process, and consequently many of these young people have had few affirmative experiences of school or the creative process. Developing a radio show and then going live to air offers a condensed version of this kind of affirmative creative arc; filmmaking tends to offer a more developed experience of this arc. What creative pedagogical projects like Youthworx and Cross-Marked can offer is this flexible (yet supported) space and time in which the practitioner/students can ebb when they need to ebb, and not have to flow before they are ready.

Lastly, binaries of silent/voiced and marginal/centre become unproductive in creative dialogues, and in collaborations which depend on an interweaving of multiple positionalities and experiences. Absence

of voice is not necessarily the same as silence, and silence (as any child knows) can have a productively transgressive power.

Groups like Arts Based Educational Research (ABER), a special interest group of the American Education Research Association, advocate the use of creative methodologies in schools in order to increase the wellbeing of all members of school communities, not just those on the margins. In the Australian context, pivotal research projects including Risky Business (O'Brien and Donelan, 2006), and the nationwide Songroom program offer a growing body of arts work, research data, and schools collaborations that all point to the value of reimagining the value of arts in education.

Perhaps educational institutions, by supporting creative collaborations which positively impact pedagogical space, time, relationship and language for self-expression, will draw back young people like those who find productive engagement at Youthworx and in projects like Cross-Marked, and who yearn to find similarly attractive opportunities in schools.

### *Conclusion: creating new knowledge*

In this article we have highlighted two Australian projects as examples of the ways in which creative endeavour and arts-based pedagogies can actively, creatively and authentically re-engage young people who are, or who are in danger of becoming, disengaged, to increase the social capital of practitioners, participants and methodologies in arts education. We reject the notion of 'at-risk' as a static and reifying term of disempowerment for young people who are actively engaged in the building of their own social and cultural capital, sometimes despite very great odds and obstacles in mainstream culture. Rather, we embrace the constructive benefits of creative risk-taking as productively 'risky business' (O'Brien and Donelan 2007), a way of being that comes naturally to both artists and adolescents – and to good teachers. The authentic creative journey always contains an element of risk, but it remains the journey that is risky, not the young people. This article suggests that arts-based projects are effective tools in helping to build cultures of participation and deep engagement (not disengagement) for these young people who are simultaneously learning how to collaborate,

participate and productively engage in both traditional and non-traditional educative contexts. We also challenge educators to continue offering disruptive pedagogies that refocus evaluative lenses on process rather than outcome-based assessment.

As Taylor reminds us, “We claim to foster dialogue, collaboration and interpretation among our students and must not neglect these approaches in the wider research community” (1996, p.144) we constitute as researchers, teachers and practitioners. Both social media enterprises like Youthworx and ethnocinematic projects like Cross-Marked: Sudanese Australian Young Women Talk Education trouble the very notions of ‘engaged’ and ‘disengaged’ through the productive outcomes and experiences of the co-participants. Both projects and authors suggest possibilities for arts-based learning, about schools without walls in which real-world applications and creative risk-taking play an important role in enticing young people back to learning, while inviting educators to embrace the pause, the chaos, and sometimes the uncomfortable silence required by true creative endeavour.

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# The intertextuality of environmental art in childhood special places: >

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# How play, flow, and pedagogy of place can reform education

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Choice is ubiquitous in the western world, yet in contemporary times we often find ourselves choosing easy paths, unsustainable solutions, and escapist experiences. We are surrounded by embodied options that are seemingly “out of favour.” This is especially apparent in those opportunities to play or be creative outside. This paper is written as performative inquiry using video, embodiment, and poetry as reflection on playing and making of environmental art in my own special childhood place. I dedicated an entire day to playing in that special place and developed a subsequent short film that I analyzed through the lens of pedagogy of place. Playing in our special places (even as adults) is an option that revives and reinvigorates us and must be considered as a solution for educational reform.

*Keywords: special places, environmental art, environmental education, film-making, choice.*

*Saturday, March 5, 2011*

*What could have  
distracted me*

7am -10am: Woke up, drove to trendy breakfast place, spent \$22.73 on a latté and vegan sausages, had another coffee, wandered around downtown, remembered that nothing is open this early, drove home, took antacids, watched the juncos on my bird feeder through my bathroom window, vacuumed the halls, read local independent newspaper looking for things to do.

10am-1230pm: Ate second breakfast of toast with cream cheese and red pepper jelly, fixed bicycle in basement, listened to CBC radio, got frustrated at The House: A week in national politics. Ate lunch, perogies with hot sauce, decided to go to Beer Fest at 1pm, cleaned kitchen.

1230pm-9pm: Drove downtown, went to beer fest, no one was there because it just started, went to a matinee: True Grit, ate tacos at a great Central America restaurant across the road, drove home, read a book, fell asleep.

*What I did instead*

7am -10am: woke up; ate toast with peanut butter; collected camera gear; biked to childhood special place; filmed myself in the place; talked about memories and thoughts; tried to rebuild a fort; ended up creating environmental art, found broken dead branches, tied them onto Garry oak trees in a parallel grid pattern, wove scotch broom through them.

10am-1230pm: continued to make more scotch broom weavings; forgot about time; filmed myself making art; took photos; considered other forms of this art; sketched and wrote in my creative journal; said hello to other people in the park; noticed my blood sugar was low - lunch time.

1230pm-5pm: biked to a local café; spent \$12.63 on lunch; reflected on my morning; decided to go back and continue making art; continued making videos; lost track of time again; biked home; made dinner; downloaded footage for film; read a book; fell asleep.

That we choose to do one thing over another on any given day could be one of the most challenging behavioural barriers to a sustainable future for the western world. As North Americans, we are riddled with options in what we eat, what we watch, when we sleep, where we live, and what we do during the day. Acknowledging that there is disparity of opportunities available to battered socio-economic and minority populations in North America, westerners are typically privileged (and hindered) by choice. Yet in this era of instant gratification and “bigger, better, faster,” opportunities seem to draw us away from connecting to the natural world. This disassociation of humans from place is an ultimate failing of schooling systems and cultural prioritization. Through these priorities, choice becomes a paradox of itself. More choice means fewer real decisions (Schwartz, 2005). As seen in the timeline above, it took courage for me to choose to play for an entire day, rather than watch films, go to Beer Fest, and spend money at expensive restaurants. I had to literally break the mold to spend slow time in my special childhood place in Victoria, BC, Canada.

Perhaps due to this paralysis of choice, humans are more disconnected from nature than any other time in our history (Charles, 2009; Louv, 2005). Granted, technology and modern life have given us amazing advances, such as international communications, inoculations for diseases, and iPads. Yet, with all this advancement in technology, humans are leading increasingly interior and sedentary lives (Castelli & Erwin, 2007). Despite the ironical nature of writing a scholarly article that attempts to describe outdoor play and childhood special places, I feel compelled to share this idea with a scholarly audience in a traditional (and if you are willing, non-traditional) format.

Performative writing and Creative Analytical Practices (CAP ethnography) provide refreshing methods for creative freedom within the confines of dusty scholarly tome-like research (Pollack, 1998; Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005). Methods of inquiry that include these practices are available to all disciplines of research and afford scholars with ways to explore language, writing, and creative processes that can speak to affective ways of knowing and researching. The fact that I can use “a day of play” that includes creating environmental art, making a short film, and cutting my

fingers from excessive scotch broom (*Cytisus scoparius*) pulling (and the subsequent reflection on this day) within a collegiate exercise and still be considered sane is antithetical to the stereotype of university research so ubiquitous in popular opinion: “Academics are the worst communicators. Why can’t they write in a way that is accessible and in a language that everyone understands?” (Anonymous friend, personal communication, March 18, 2011).

Situating our understanding and subsequent expression of that understanding of the world through place invokes our sense of identity (Hurren, 2009), both personally (Stanger, 2007) and ecologically speaking (Thomashow, 1995). In reference to her method of inquiry, Hurren suggests that embodying these experiences is an act of paying attention:

Lately I have been taking advantage of the ‘convenient portability of words’ in terms of paying attention to where I place words in my explorations of place identity, and embodied knowing. Especially when I am working with the geographic forms of representation, an area of inquiry where images are a very prominent feature: maps, atlases, charts, drawings, photographs; and an area of inquiry wherein questions of “where” are prominent. (*Hurren, 2009, p. 229*)

Experiences in place that combine a) knowing where we are; b) paying attention to our senses, reflections, and emotions, and c) playful creative inquiry creates a unique opportunity for transformational learning that includes the development of ecological literacy (Orr, 1992). For instance, special outdoor places play a role in our lives as meditative, reflective, geo-orienting, mental, and spiritual locations and have been linked with increased environmental awareness and actions in later life (Chawla, 2009; Kennedy, 2005; Sobel, 1993, 1997; Wilson, 1995).

### *Modify that bodily knowing*

With all of this evidence of the importance of place, I bet you just started to reflect on your own childhood special place. Almost everyone has a special place, whether it is in a downtown alley or an

entire peninsula in the Arctic circle, humans connect with landscape, geography, and biota in emotional and binding ways. So as a way to help you, as the reader, embody these concepts and before I continue with more performative pontifications, I invite you to do the next three activities:

1. If you have the privilege and power to do so, please stop reading this paper right now and get up out of your chair and go to your special outdoor place and play like you are nine years old...have fun; and/or
2. If you are still reading, then you don't have the privilege for option one or you are stubborn and don't like being ordered around by words on paper. So then, turn the paper over, turn off the computer, close the door, and turn the lights off. Close your eyes and try to "feel" your special outdoor place. Revisit your swamp or street or backyard in your mind for approximately five minutes. Then draw, write, sing, or dance your special place into the room....have fun; and
3. Mandatory: Visit my website at <http://www.nicholasstanger.ca> and click on "special places" at the top.

Thank-you for indulging me in this embodiment exercise. I hope that these activities will contextualize this paper as you negotiate your way through it.

### *Video-induced Contextualization*

The remainder of this paper should be read only after watching the 10 minute video and reflecting on your own special place as described above. This video was created as an exploratory auto-ethnographic exercise with the intent to play like I was nine-years-old in my special childhood outdoor place. I was completely alone in my special place, with only my bicycle, tripod, and video-enabled digital SLR camera. My idea was to play for the entire day, as if I was nine-years-old, with a normal timeline that included going for lunch when I was hungry and returning in the afternoon with new vigour. Throughout the experience I attempted to be metacognitive while capturing my playing on film. This means that I talked to the camera

about feelings and thoughts as they arose in this process. Once I had finished playing, I returned home, downloaded the footage and photographs, and proceeded to create a short documentary film of my experience.

Below, I explore my reflections on this play day as they relate to the scholarly literature on pedagogy of place, play, and transformative learning. I believe that the exploratory role of video creation, writing as research, and environmental art is a creative crucible for playfulness and reflection. Like any performative writing exercise, imagery-based reflection such as auto-videography can be an effective method to investigate ways of knowing within a framework of personal experience.

### *Re-visiting my childhood space*

Curiously, as I was biking over here, I started to have a bit of trepidation, I felt nervous about how I was going to interact with this space again, I almost thought that I might change the way that I remembered, and what I remembered by trying to re-enact it. (*Stanger, 2011, 1:42*)

By the time I set out to go to play in my special place, I had romanticized this concept as a monumental idea, one that would shape the methods of inquiry around my PhD dissertation. But in that instance of being fully prepared with charged batteries, empty memory cards, camera gear, tripod, and warm clothing, doubt crept into my mind: ‘Am I being silly thinking that I can recreate some childhood play memory? Is this a foolish approach to research, with so many major environmental catastrophes in this world? Why focus on playing and appreciation?’ Yet, I pedaled on, committed to this day, without knowing how it would unfold. Within 20 minutes of arriving, arranging my gear, starting to film and collecting wood to rebuild a childhood fort that I had played in for many hours, the nine-year-old playing fell apart:

...as I am collecting materials, I am thinking, ‘I can’t rebuild a fort, my body and brain are different than when I was nine,

when I was here last time.’ But I am being thrown into various other ideas, just sitting here touching this damp, rotting wood, I can think of, sort of, ways to express a new me, to reinvent some experience here. (*Stanger, 2011, 3:50*)

This realization of reinventing new experiences is profound to me. In reference back to the idea that we have a paradox of choices, and that one of my alternative day activities might have been sedentary in a theatre and watch a movie, I recognize that playing in a childhood place might seem boring. However, this point of reinvention is critical, where inspiration and ideas are developed through the rejection of playing like I was nine-years-old. I was having fun! With all my life-experiences in tree-climbing, living and teaching in The Bahamas, and working with youth, I was able to express a new “me” within this playful space. So instead of creating a fort, I started to create environmental art, a subject I have been teaching for many years in various universities. However, I was using this activity for my own play-purpose rather than as an instructional activity for teachers or students.

Being a biologist and understanding that the park I was playing in was designed to protect an endangered ecosystem, the Coastal Douglas-fir biogeoclimatic zone - Garry oak Ecosystem<sup>1</sup>, I realized that I needed to tread carefully and do as little damage as possible. At the same time, I recognized that this ecosystem had been overtaken by scotch broom, an invasive species originally from Scotland and planted as an ornamental garden plant. This plant is known to out-compete local species by growing very tall and covering the shrub layer within Garry oak and other forests. Therefore, these green twiggy plants became the material for which I tied with, wove with, and bundled throughout my artistic exploration (Figures 1, 2).

Revisiting my special place in this way, where inspiration is derived



Nicholas Stanger *Figure 1. Quercus quilt, 2011*

digital print, scotch broom, decaying sticks, Garry oak  
Approx. 120cm x 50cm *photo courtesy of the artist*



Nicholas Stanger *Figure 2. QQ detail 2011*

digital print, scotch broom, decaying sticks, Garry oak  
Approx. 120cm x 50cm *photo courtesy of the artist*

through the process of creating art, is a very freeing way of playing. I found that I was completely absorbed by the project, without recognizing if I was cold or whether the time was passing. This flow was never interrupted by other park visitors. However, when hunger pangs started to get a hold of me, I had to find food. Curiously, this time-out gave me the chance to reflect on what I was doing with rejuvenated deepness by sketching my sculpture and considering my overall feelings about the project. Even when I was eating lunch, my senses were highly aware. I noticed individual bird song, the texture of the mug I was drinking from and the variegated leaves in the shrubs for sale in the café outside of which I was sitting. In this moment, I recorded this as a field café poem:

we must all be advocates for the places we know/love

*buzzy dive-bombing anna's hummingbird,  
squishy eggplant in my mouth*

special places allow us to see change  
(less invasive species, less people playing)

*the details in this fence line create an unusual  
peek-a-boo feature*

knowing our communities must extend to  
our natural communities

*my fingers are covered in tiny stinging  
scars from my nails to my knuckles*

our memories are scalar, things seemed bigger when  
I was nine-years-old

My left and right brains were interacting in a most profound way, struggling to out-compete or make voice for the cognitive and physical witnessing that was occurring in this café poem. It reminded me of the eco-scholarly nature of McKay's (2001) meditation on poetry: "A poem, or poem-in-waiting, contemplates what language can't do: then it does something with language - in homage, or grief or anger, or praise" (McKay, 2001, p. 87)

My café poem also provides evidence that my adult play, though

an homage, was influenced by my morals and ethics. Play such as this, might have some larger community function like creating a monitoring system by asking the public to revisit their childhood special places and notice personal, community and ecological differences over time. Yet, these limitations of morals and ethics are really part of an educated lens. I realized that to achieve sustainability in my lifetime, humans will need to engage much more deeply with the environment that supports them:

It's increasingly hard to describe what I am experiencing right now...it's almost like I am being catapulted into reflection, and perhaps it is process, it is flow, I have no clue what time it is. Perhaps it's the fact that humans seem to be stuck in our brains. (*Stanger, 2011, 7:42*)

### *Pedagogy of Place, Flow, and Play*

In environmental education and geography literature, the role of place is well understood (Harrison, 2010; Mueller Worster, 2006; Naess, 1992; Ruitenberg, 2005). Harrison suggests that education of 'place' can be largely divided into two worlds within the English-speaking communities (American "place-based education" (Chawla, 2009; Haigh, 2006, 2008; Knapp, 2006; Orr, 1990; Sobel, 1993) and Australian/Canadian "place" within environmental education (Obergh, 2003; Payne & Wattchow, 2009; Stewart, 2006). Though this distinction is somewhat dichotomous, the subtle differences of how place in education is used helps us construct an understanding of educational diversity in the western world. At the same time, understanding the commonalities of place are useful as a study of its transferability not only in western culture but among all cultures on Earth.

It is through sense of place, that we can feel spiritual, emotional, and cognitive connection whether it is our childhood special places or some new place (Mueller Worster, 2006). Place-based learning (and its research) is inherently action-based because it involves the student embodying an experience. Yet this simple explanation doesn't seem to warrant the complexity of place when place-based experiences address space, time, emotional literacy,

creativity, inspiration, spirituality, healing, and learning:

The discussion of ‘why’ engage with place-based approaches to environmental education implies a research methodology that does not simply measure sense of place, but looks at how it is developed, investigating the relationship between epistemology (‘place-based learning’) and ontology (‘a sense of place’). Furthermore, with regards to care and responsibility for more distant places, the research method requires the ability to move across different scales, negotiating what Malpas calls the ‘nested’ character of place (Malpas, 1999): the glen, the watershed, the region, etc., and follow the interconnections of modern life. (*Harrison, 2010, p. 12*)

This concept indicates that place-based learning and its intersection with environmental education research techniques is both about scale and sense. Once we start learning about one scale of place, we are impelled to continue learning about how it fits into other places. With this scaled approach to learning, we are also exploring the diversity of modalities, emotionality, and spirituality.

Yet, can place-based play and education be rendered into such exact terminology (epistemology and ontology) without being misrepresented? I think that a paper such as this can barely touch on the actual experiences of education in place. This is why I decided to incorporate non-traditional performative elements as a way to inquire about how place affects me. Even to argue that my day of play was an “embodied experience where I was learning about place” seems specious. I was both embodied and disembodied during that day, where flow took hold through activities of aesthetics and reflection (Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, 1997a, 1997c). That my existence was temporarily suspended as I played outside might explain the feeling of connection and even merging with the environment. This was more than a Cartesian approach to learning; it was more than a task or pedagogical activity - I was connected to flow through Csikszentmihalyi’s (1997b) seven point model:

1. Focused: completely involved in what we are doing
2. Ecstasy: being outside everyday reality
3. Clarity: knowing what needs to be done and how well we are doing
4. Do-ability: knowing that our skills are adequate to the task
5. Serenity: having no worries about oneself, beyond the boundaries of ego
6. Timelessness: being throughly focussed on the present
7. Motivation: being motivated through the activity itself

*(adapted from M. Csikszentmihalyi, 2004)*

Flow is a critical component to playing and place. That I existed in ecstasy, or outside of my body, allowed for deeper and richer observation of the world around me. My playing with scotch broom and Garry oak trees re-affirmed my abilities and clarity. These steps of flow should be the basis for educational reform combined with the understanding that outdoor play, even within structured schools, must celebrate the acts of fun, engagement, and meaningfulness.

Humans connect with place through aesthetics, existentialism, and evaluative understanding of the environment (Stanger, 2007). However, like the paradox of choice, there is often anxiety and barriers associated with choosing to play outside (especially as adults). One way that I seemed to be at peace with being a 31-year-old play-advocate is accepting that I didn't need to be unique or special:

The thing about playing is that we need to forget that it doesn't need to be amazing or unique or new or never done before. Play should be just for ourselves, for a way to move and even stop thinking for just a moment of our day. It's not that I am stopping thinking, it's that I am thinking about very different things right now. I am thinking about the sounds that are around me and the feeling of the scotch broom and the wet wood and this rag bag lichen; and the best part is, I have no idea what I am creating. *(Stanger, 2011, 4:41)*

I think our activities as westerners have become too structured. We have developed this motivation to fill our time with projects and entertainment and busyness. This is apparent in our schooling, parenting, business practices, work obsession and even retirement. We seem to be trying to control what is going to happen in our daily lives through obsessive “calendarization” of our existence. Of course, planning is important; Just look at towns that didn’t plan for rapid population expansion in comparison to towns that had time and planning expertise. One town looks and feels like a sprawling mass with few livable areas, and the other town feels integrated, logical, supportive, and sustainable. But taking the risk of not knowing what will happen in any particular day or activity I think allows for creative and expressive experiences. Further to this, if these experiences are conducted in an outdoor special place, I feel that our connection to that place is substantially enhanced. We embrace a more humble approach to connecting with our local environment and can start observing the interrelationships between its integrity and our health, wellbeing, creativity, and spirituality.

Therefore, place, play, flow, and not knowing form the basis of my argument for educational and cultural reform. Without these elements, I fear that our society will continue to ignore and be apathetic to the complexity of the environmental crises around us. We all have choice in our day to day actions. Let your choice be to return to your special place to play.

I am really enjoying myself and I am curious  
why I don’t do this more.

*(Stanger, 2011, 8:20)*

## *Acknowledgments*

This paper was written as a project for a PhD class in Writing as Research. My professor, Dr. Wanda Hurren, helped support this paper's conceptualization and encouraged play through performative writing and reflection. Editing and flow and film-making was supported by my partner, JoyVance Beauchamp MA.

## *Notes*

1. Garry oak ecosystems are unique to a small part of southwestern British Columbia, where less than 5% of the habitat remains in a near-natural condition. More than 100 species of plants, mammals, reptiles, birds, butterflies, dragonflies and bugs are at risk of extinction in Garry oak and associated ecosystems. Several species have already been eliminated. (GOERT, 2011, ¶1)

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## **What Is a Poem Good For? 14 Possibilities**

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## **Schools without walls: creative endeavor and disengaged young people**

*Anne Harris & Jon Staley*

## **The intertextuality of environmental art in childhood special places: How play, flow, and pedagogy of place can reform education**

*Nicholas R.G. Stanger*