

C O M M E N T A R Y

Talking Trade: Literacy Researchers as Practicing Artists

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Over the past two decades, educational scholars have seen major shifts in how literacy is viewed. One of these shifts has been toward conceptualizing literacy as a set of social practices (Street, 1995) that people embody and value. To disrupt current definitions of literacy, the valued practices that keep those forms of literacy in place must change. We, the authors, have significantly changed our social practices to include personal, systematic, and continuous study of the arts, so much so that we identify both as literacy researchers and practicing artists. As such, our understanding of literacy has changed.

This article presents our thinking as artists and literacy researchers about meaning making, including our reflections on how working in the arts has impacted our perspectives on why the arts are significant to literacy practices. We do not suggest that we abandon what we already know about good language arts programs, but our frame is now different. We now ask, How might we understand literacy, not only through a literacy lens but also through an arts lens? What insights might be gleaned about literacy from careful study of one's social practices around the arts?

As literacy researchers who are also practicing artists, we are developing a language to see differently; we have learned to “talk trade,” a way of talking and creating within disciplines, such as art. In so doing, we have embodied Greene's (2001) call to “break with the taken-for-granted...and look through the lenses of various ways of knowing, seeing, and feeling in a conscious endeavor to impose different orders upon experience” (p. 5). As artists who happen to be literacy researchers, we are brought together into a studied conversation about how the arts help us notice aspects of literacy that we had ignored previously.

Echoes of Significant Practices

Jerry's (third author) cartoon (Figure 1) situates the three of us at Echo Point, a metaphorical space that acknowledges influences, or echoes, that have shaped us as literacy researchers and practicing artists, and offers us perspective on

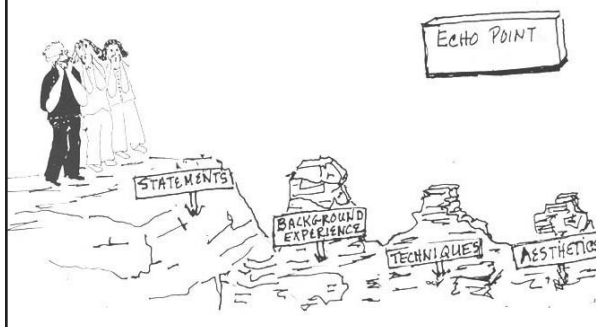
how *what* we say (e.g., statements) is shaped by *how* we say it (e.g., aesthetics, techniques, background experiences). One influence that has given us great insight is Goodman's (1978) concept of kidwatching, the observing, recording, and studying of children's literacy processes to plan curriculum and instruction tailored to the needs and strengths of individual learners. Kidwatching is a matter of tapping the human potential and using it to create curricula that expand our ways of being and living in the world.

Whereas many argue that education is in crisis, we would argue that the real crisis is education's failure to tap the full range of human potential. Echoing Goodman (1978), we have studied ourselves as practicing artists as an extension of a research tradition that involved kidwatching and later watching adolescents as they interacted on and with computers (Knobel & Lankshear, 2007).

A second influence is the conversations that emerge within professional communities of learning, such as the International Reading Association, the National Council of Teachers of English, and the Literacy Research Association (formerly the National Reading Conference). Just as we engage intellectually with scholars at professional conferences, we also engage intellectually and aesthetically with other artists within studios. In both spaces, as literacy researchers and practicing artists, we talk about strategies, techniques, and concepts, all of which lead to social action. Third, as literacy researchers, we understand how the language arts expand our meaning-making potential and our ability to make sense of the world. As practicing artists, we understand how the arts help us notice *how* things are said; we realize that not everything knowable can be expressed in written form.

We see these three concepts, among others, as significant practices from which we have learned a great deal as literacy researchers. However, by positioning ourselves as artists who happen to be literacy researchers, we want to initiate a different conversation: How does working in the arts enable us to become different as artists, researchers, and teachers? What fresh perspectives might we gain by engaging in living inquiry through hands-on participation in the arts?

Figure 1 Jerry Harste's Cartoon Drawing



Conversations About Art

We are three literacy researchers who have studied in community arts programs over many years. Jerry has studied drawing nearly all his life, developed an interest in sand sculpting during his family vacations to Myrtle Beach, and is currently studying watercolor. As a child, Peggy (first author) started studying theater but moved into ceramics as a result of her dissertation work studying the literacy processes of sixth-grade art students. She has studied at a local community arts center for 14 years, showing and selling her work in Atlanta art festivals. Teri's (second author) childhood interest in creative writing led to a career as a published novelist, and her scholarship in disabilities and literacy led her to study nonlinguistic expression through photography and collage. In essence, the three of us have been artists since childhood and have engaged continuously in the study of an art form. Only now, in our adulthood, do we acknowledge this part of our identities and how it shaped who we are as literacy researchers.

To explore our thinking about ourselves as literacy researchers/practicing artists, we engaged in a series of deliberate conversations. To prepare, each of us chose 10 pieces of our own work that signified a meaning for us that other pieces did not. To focus our conversations, we asked one another the following questions: "Why did you choose these pieces?" "What did you learn from them?" "What are they trying to say?" and "Knowing what you know now as an artist, what changes would you make in your teaching and research?" Our conversations shifted

back and forth from our art to what we learned about literacy practices as artists. In essence, our identities as artists and researchers became interestingly entangled.

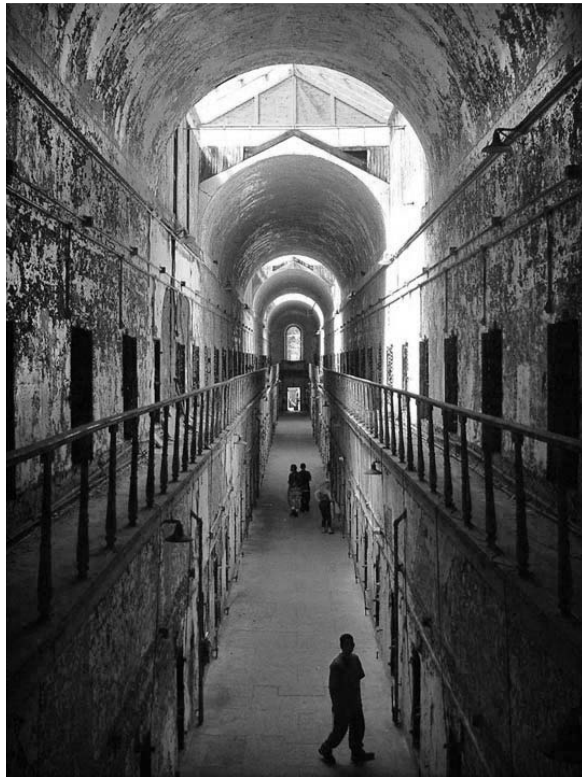
What We Learned

As we reflected on our conversations, we identified three aspects of meaning making that emerged from the study of our work as artists: (1) Meaning making starts with the aesthetic, (2) working in the arts fosters transmediation, and (3) transmediation supports critical expression and public signification. In this section, we share how we came to these understandings.

Meaning Making Starts With the Aesthetic

As artists, researchers, and teachers, our meaning making in our art form began with our interest in how objects function aesthetically, how they provoke sensations of joy, desire, intrigue, inquiry, and even discomfort or confusion. As we talked about our art

Figure 2 Teri Holbrook's Photograph, Eastern State Penitentiary, Philadelphia, PA



making and what drew us to it, we discovered that our art was informed by our experiences and that those experiences were tied to particular sensations. We drew from what called to us.

Teri, for example, wanted to step away from written language and explore the communicative power of photography. For several years, she made repeated trips to photograph a historical Quaker prison, where she was drawn to “the colors, the textures, the glows...to the aesthetics of the image” (Figure 2). The prison, an example of 19th-century surveillance architecture, was a complicated aesthetic space of inquiry, discomfort, and peacefulness. Her photos of this space later became elements of her collage. For Jerry, Teri’s prison photos and collages evoked isolation: “Teri uses windows, almost a journey into an isolated soul. She also uses steps to show the decay. She picks up decay elsewhere: paint peeling on the buildings, broken glass, and markings. She also uses vanishing lines, and her first pieces are so design featured.” Teri intentionally attempted symmetry in Figure 2 to create an essence of “isolation.” In some versions, she Photoshopped out the people on the bottom floor to achieve “an abandoned space” as she toyed with notions of symmetry and asymmetry. Despite photography’s traditional use as a means to preserve moments, her images were not static; as with the decay of the photographed spaces themselves, her images were open to change.

Aesthetics also elicit pleasure and desire in us and push us to continue our artistic inquiry. For Jerry, desire encouraged him to seek out the essence of a flower, specifically a poppy.

Jerry: Here is my “Poppy” (Figure 3)... I was working on capturing essence, trying to capture the essence of a poppy, or the essence of a cornflower or a rose. You can’t believe how much paper I wasted to figure out the essence.

Peggy: Do you think you succeeded?

Jerry: Yeah...there is something very ephemeral about this poppy.... It seems like if you bumped this poppy, you’d lose a petal.

Peggy: This is one of your first watercolors? It feels like one of your first ones.

Jerry: It's very simple; it doesn't have any wash on the back. This is a little misleading, because it shows a little dark, but it's white paper. I just happened to try this poppy, and it worked, sort of.... If you look at my work, every now and then there's a poppy picture. I still have something to say about poppies. I guess because I was successful once, I think maybe I could do something good with poppies.

We saw our initial start in aesthetics as an itch that encouraged deeper inquiry into exploring how art evokes emotion, learning about and developing technique, and capturing an essence. Aesthetics, then, led to an uncomfortable feeling of being able to do some things with our media and not others. This uncomfortableness initiated even deeper inquiry into how we could control the media and tools associated with the art forms to convey specific messages. Importantly, our exploration of technique allowed us to identify unarticulated desires and examine, interrogate, and use them in new, more meaningful ways.

Working in the Arts Fosters Transmediation

For us, the arts fostered transmediation, a translation of an idea from one sign system to another (Suhor, 1984), which allowed us to see ourselves and the world differently. Sign systems, Harste (1994) argued, are another point of knowledge and help us mediate our world. As humans, we are continual makers and shapers of symbols and, hence, meaning. With this in mind, meaning making cannot be viewed as static but as a dynamic process, a way to reposition ourselves as new in the world that allows us to think metaphorically and symbolically and to try on new perspectives.

For Teri, collage and photography help her translate the concept of surveillance through standardized testing, especially as it relates to ability and disability. Teri discussed her collage entitled "Field Data" (Figure 4): "So, here we have a child in a field of flowers. I took the Woodcock-Johnson score and chopped it up. I had it echo the flowers in the field that [the girl is] in.... The idea is that she abides and lives in this field of data that *makes* her." Teri's desire to speak critically and visually about surveillance is transmediated across many of her artworks.

Figure 3 Jerry Harste's Watercolor of a Poppy



Figure 4 Teri Holbrook's "Field Data" Collage (Paper and Marker)



In our conversations as artists, we articulated how metaphors allowed us to visualize concerns in new ways. For Peggy, work in clay allowed her to reimagine the places and spaces that animals occupy. Her "Rhinoceros Rhyton" (Figure 5) evolved from her study of rhytons (i.e., ancient drinking vessels) to retranslate the idea of what *cup* might mean, how it functions, and how it rests in spaces. She struggled with how to display these rhytons, experimenting with a range of different stands. To support the rhytons, her brother-in-law, a wood turner, designed

Figure 5 Peggy Albers's "Rhinoceros Rhyton" (Clay and Wood)



and developed a stand, which also served as a design element and extension of the animal's body.

What we learned about transmediation is that we necessarily must draw on multiple systems of communication to express meaning. Transmediation allowed us to step outside ourselves to see new possibilities. Peggy recast her interest in and knowledge of wild animals as drinking vessels, and Teri's interest in the concept of surveillance became the metaphorical foundation for her photography. Transmediation encouraged us to see familiar objects, experiences, and interests in new ways. These new insights became themes that appeared over time in large bodies of our work. As such, they became, in a sense, an identifiable signature.

Transmediation Supports Critical Reflection and Public Signification

Our work as critical literacy researchers enables us to position art as a subversive language and situate meaning making from a sociocritical perspective. Unlike

some who wish to see art as an object that matches so-far, others see art as a way to speak back to the taken-for-granted notions of art as harmonious, beautiful, and familiar. As researchers, we have noticed how, in schools, art is used as a catalyst to develop sensitive humans and better writing and reading, and offers a Friday afternoon respite from the week's grind. However, as practicing artists, we understand that when viewed as a language, art allows us to develop a critical stance; we consciously engage, entertain alternate ways of being, continuously inquire, and are reflexive. Our work, linguistic or visual, over time and across texts, contains traces of our perspectives toward a range of topics, perspectives that we have made public through articles, showings, and sales of our work.

Jerry's interest in drawing positioned him to produce a number of cartoons. He described his self-portrait (Figure 6): "It was the kind of thing that I did for years and years—it was what I did when I went to meetings. I wrote pithy comments next to them like 'Changing a university is like moving a cemetery.'" This interest in cartooning emerged while he was in the army. "We started an underground newspaper, and I did all of the cartooning, the sassy speak-back qualities I like." His critical stance encouraged an inquiry into cartooning as a genre and political cartoons more specifically: "I was fascinated with political cartoons; there's something about art that is so powerful." This inquiry into how art as a language is used to speak back inspired him to take photos of public graffiti, which led to a show of this work in Urbana, Illinois: "[Graffiti] is common man's way of speaking back and speaking out. I like exposing this."

Our work oscillates between learning to express through technique and expressing our critical stances through art. As Jerry noted in our conversation, "What it harks back to is if I had my whole life to live over again, I would have made my life as a political cartoonist."

Peggy's recent work in clay speaks to and against social issues and legislation that serve some and deny others. This desire to speak politically through art was initiated by an aerobics instructor who was also a middle school principal. Before one aerobics class, he apologized for being late and explained that he was overseeing painters working on his house. "And

between the three of them,” he said, “they had five teeth.”

While the rest of the class laughed, Peggy was deeply affected and commenced a series of clay pieces that presented animals with large teeth, no teeth, missing teeth—all of them smiling grandly. Like many picture book authors and novelists, she uses animals to express human experience and emotion. Her animal basket entitled “The Wedding” (Figure 7) is part of a series of baskets that speaks to the rights of gay couples to marry.

For the three of us, the arts enable us to make statements and speak to and against issues of social injustice that operate in our worlds. Through clay, Peggy is able to speak against bigotry and discrimination, while Teri speaks against ableism and the various tools used to define and confine learners. Jerry, in turn, speaks against policies and practices that drive social institutions. Through art shows, festivals, galleries, journals, and other spaces, we have made our work public and, in so doing, foster public signification.

Discussion

For the past decades, as part of the literacy research community, we have used the arts to service literacy curricula. That is, we have used the arts to develop strong readers and writers at the expense of not fully engaging with or understanding the significance of art as a language system and a resource for tapping human potential. Rather than seeing a curriculum as a blueprint or defined plan, we need to see a curriculum as extending our reach and the reach of our students.

First, by engaging in the arts, we have been able to take on new perspectives that upend our prior notions of literacy and curriculum. The arts allow us to imagine a new curriculum of sensitivity. With this new curriculum, we as teachers can develop a sensitivity to having time to explore a form of expression, a sensitivity to whom we are teaching and the kinds of experiences they have had, a sensitivity to revaluing art—and other systems of meaning—and the techniques through which expression can be made, and a sensitivity to giving students enough time to find their own voices, ideas, and resistances within various

Figure 6 Jerry Harste’s Self-Portrait (Pencil)



meaning-making systems. In this way, arts curricula expand spaces of inquiry and open new routes of exploration. We do not believe that we would have understood the importance of this shift in perspective had we not become practicing artists ourselves.

Figure 7 Peggy Albers's "The Wedding" (Clay and Underglazes)



Second, each artwork carries a story and allows us to linger—in the art itself, in the spaces where we make it, and in the conversations around which we create our work. Each of us anticipates the time we intentionally carve out to go to the studio; it is here that we talk trade about our work and the work of other artists. We never tire of these exchanges, as it is shared and interested talk. Each artwork we make carries a story, one that as artists we want to hear, whether it is about the design, the techniques, the composition, or new untried possibilities. It is this talking trade that propels us into continued and motivated inquiry and makes us active listeners to each other's stories. As literacy researchers, we understand that language arts classes must be spaces where children want to linger, get lost in inquiry, have a story for each of the pieces that they make, and talk trade with each other.

We also have noticed that our teachers, like us, engage in ongoing study. There is no sort of pinnacle on which they sit. They participate alongside us as artists who are always learning; they organize workshops

with outside artists to push our thinking as well as their own. We love that teachers, students, and invited artists engage together in elbow-to-elbow work; everyone takes on an attitude of a learner no matter how accomplished. We suggest that all of us become better artists through this constant cross-collectivity, a facet of our work as contemporary artists probably not available to master artists of the past. Their work, like ours, is fused with echoes of artists with whom they have studied or interacted.

With new literacies (e.g., YouTube, the Internet, webinars), the potential for us to share our work is even greater. We suggest that teachers in language arts classes must also engage actively in ongoing inquiry and share this side-by-side learning and enthusiasm with their students. In so doing, teachers can position students to work toward their potential and use it to create curricula that expand students' ways of being and living in the world.

Conclusion

When we asked one another, "Knowing what you know now, how would you have changed your research and teaching?" each of us responded differently. For Jerry, the change would have been significant: "I would have been much more intent on developing and articulating a sociosemiotic curriculum model. I think such a model would enhance current discussions about hybridity, new technologies, cultural sensitivities, identity, and third space." Peggy would have more actively studied English education through the arts, worked more thoughtfully with art as a language, and not used the arts solely as a catalyst to study literature and writing. Teri would have more boldly challenged the dominance of word-only approaches to literacy pedagogy and more assertively asked literacy researchers to consider how what we do so well—put thoughts into words—and cherish so deeply—the power of writing to mean and bring about change—limits and negatively inscribes so many children and adults.

Of course, the paradox in our argument is that, just as it takes time for us to develop our knowledge of an art form, so it also takes time for us to come to new insights and conclusions. Importantly, we could only hear and learn from echoes—from the works of

others and from our own work—when given the time to linger and listen.

When we embarked on the writing of this article, we were stymied by written language and how to capture the passion and essence that we see in each of our art pieces. Perhaps that is one of the most telling insights that we gleaned from this collective project—words can fail us. Acknowledging that failure opens possibilities for teaching students how best to make meaning of their lives.

We started this article with a cartoon depicting the three of us at Echo Point looking out. As we wrote this article, our work continued to resonate with the sounds, concepts, and thoughts that are a part of our lives as literacy researchers and artists. Just as our lives have been changed as a result of our systematic study of the arts, we hope that readers will understand the arts as significant practices in their own teaching and work with students, and consider the educational lives of their students by asking, What kind of echoes will we allow them to hear?

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