Letters for possibilities and pedagogic change: Personal reflections from my "Finding Identity" project

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Abstract: This paper addresses reflections from my research when using letter-writing as an arts-based method for exploring curriculum implications within an alternative educational program in a Montreal inner-city high school. The participants, comprised of the program's students as well as its administrators and teachers, informed the research by shedding light on their experiences of the teaching and learning that occurs in such setting. By combining the literary and visual arts, the study participants explored the theme of identity through the creation of letters, and visual arts responses. As a result of this work, I employ letter-writing in this paper to address the critical and pedagogic discourses experienced and support for a call to shift educational paradigms.

Keywords: Pedagogy; Letters; Narratives; Education; Discourse.

D ear educators and colleagues,
A few years ago, I was introduced to Freire's (2005) "Teachers as Cultural Workers: Letters to Those Who Dare Teach". For me, this manuscript then opened up a whirlwind of conversations regarding teacher-training and educational philosophy. For certain, it had left a significant mark on my educational journey. The idea of employing letters as a form of sharing knowledge resonated deeply within me. In turn, this book resulted in my ambition as a researcher to employ letter-writing as a way of telling stories within my body of work. In this paper, I will share my research project that took place in a Montreal inner-city high school, as well as elaborate on the role of letter-writing, as my method to bridge and intertwine visual and textual narratives as an arts-based initiative within the research.

As I conducted my research, my compelling interest was guided by the following questions: 1) How does having a project-based pedagogical approach in art programs for disenfranchised teens affect the students' abilities to build on their identities? 2) What becomes of the educator in project-based pedagogy in special programs for marginalized teens? 3) How does participation in a project-based art program help define their emerging identities, but as artists? These questions were firmly rooted in my curiosity about arts pedagogy within alternative programming for disenfranchised youths. As such, my goals in this endeavour were simply to examine the Work-oriented training pathways program (WOTP) part of the John F. Kennedy high school (J.F.K). In sum, the program aims to help students who encounter learning difficulties to learn diverse skillset and competencies in hopes to help them succeed in the workforce. In such a program, the arts are often pushed aside, hence, my goal, as a researcher, was to document the learning and teaching dynamics that are embedded in such a program as well as to disseminate alternative instructional and learning strategies that emerged from this work.

This project integrated narrative inquiry as the primary methodology and life stories as method, and as the researcher, I provided an account of aspects of the lives of participants

relating to self-in-society and how this is articulated in art education. By collecting stories, including my own, and collaboratively writing narratives of individual experiences (Creswell, 2015), this study is an effort to elevate my understandings of student thinking, and to map how they may become critical agents of socialization for their artistic and educational community. The purposeful selection (Creswell, 2015) of three students from the WOTP art program, the school teacher and the school principal, and myself, was intended to examine the variety within the rich situation of the art program while providing an array of stories from different standpoints. I have decided to use narrative inquiry as methodology and life stories as a method because I knew, having previously worked and taught in the school, that this approach was appropriate to provide a different rendering, or even serve as an opportunity for the students to view and realize the act of studying, reading and writing, (Freire, 2005) as an immersive, dynamic and pedagogic action, as well as a tool for transferring creativity.

Along with engaging my research questions, I chose methods with a goal to display that research in the arts can also be a fun, visually creative and an inviting endeavour. The participants were invited to work collaboratively with me in order to shape and refine our stories as expressions of knowledge. This was in part a participatory practice, where our working together became a platform for social change within the institution and helped empower the students with critical viewpoints of their learning.

Telling narratives through letters:

To the researchers,

In creating this arts-based educational project, I was invited into a world where I learned and experienced research as a dynamic process, hence embarking on a venture that has allowed me to better understand a working arts program along with the staff and the students' situated within it. By entering the WOTP program as a research site and a natural setting (Creswell, 2015), I immediately noticed from a researcher's perspective two very important components regarding the WOTP space itself in relation to the high school, and the lack of art exhibitions within the school which I believe indirectly described the research site itself, and without words. These observations allowed me to better understand the realities in this program, where the arts were critically undervalued. As such, I have since gained an interest in further investigating these perceived ideas in the future, and I am hopeful other research projects will further inform my inquiries and contribute to the advancement of art education practices. I remember first walking into the J.F.K High School WOTP department: it then seemed so far and so remote from the rest of the school. My initial reaction was to question why the department that hosted mostly coded students (students that have a variety of learning disabilities) was situated so far from the rest of the school community.

Throughout the research project that I have conducted, I well understood that the WOTP operated very differently than the 'regular' J.F.K. As documented within the participants' stories, the WOTP is a unique program that offers alternatives for marginalized students. And I now have a number of lingering questions that have emerged from the study: What does the spatial design tell us of the school and furthermore of the WOTP program and its students? What does such separate, or indeed alienation, say to students who all have learning disabilities? How do teachers who operate in such programs come to work under such circumstances? How does their mindset shape their teaching identity? What is my duty as a public pedagogue to advance inclusivity based on the findings of this study? What is my responsibility to the participants now that the study is complete? In this particular case, does Mr. Tonin and his students feel this study

helps them gain a sense of freedom from the curriculum, or does it create a greater divide? These are all questions that have emerged as a result of my reflections while conducting this study.

I also noticed on several occasions that the participants' experiences when showcasing their artworks in various settings had deeply impacted their views of themselves. From a researcher point of view, I believe there is much more work to be done when working with disenfranchised youths and museum or gallery educational programs. Based on the recorded interviews, I subsequently noticed the participants were left with great contentment when we discussed how they felt when they exhibited at the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts (2015), among other gallery centers, weaving in the notion of identity as part of the conversation. More specific to the museum and gallery education, Rahm (2016) noted from her study that "teachers who are committed to project-based learning […] may be more inclined to seek out learning settings outside of their classrooms to enrich and support student learning" (p. 195).

As I conducted this inquiry, the emergent design provided me with multiple entry points that all interconnected as a métissage (Hasebe-Ludt, Chambers & Leggo, 2009) generating critical reflexivity upon our lives as students, researchers, and social educators within public pedagogy (Burdick & Sandlin, 2013). In this essence, we are reminded by McLaren (2007) that "…public pedagogy refers to the important idea that pedagogy as an oppositional practice and active process of learning is fundamental to the creation of critical citizenship and inclusive democracy" (p. 191). Extending from this, using a teacher-centered practices heavily add to Freire's (1972/2005) critique of the banking system in education. I feel that exemplifying the learning that occurred during the research serves much purpose, which could also demonstrate how beneficial a reconsideration of *pedagogy, identity and belonging* might be. In this regard, my study demonstrated how minor changes in the greater scheme of teaching and learning can bring to the classroom, and how the marginalized spaces of learning such as WOTP are sites for dynamic change in the public educational sector. I especially want to highlight the arts-based practices in the form of letters as stories given the profound impact this act had on the participants as a whole. In this essence, the letters collaboratively crafted by me and the participants depicted personal and insightful information seen from various perspectives, seeking to inform through reflections and reflexivity, the participants' pasts, presents and futures. As such, Mario, Romeo, Anthony, Mr. Tonin, Mr. V. and myself, all provided testaments of our own lives telling our stories about navigating through educational institutions at different times, in different places and with different outcomes. In this blended conversation, various standpoints explored our involvements in the WOTP art programming as an exemplar of practice, along with how participation in the program has affected our identities as artists, teachers and researchers. As a result, I have decided to craft letters, addressing the artist, teacher and the researcher communities, the culmination of my research findings and personal reflection on the work conducted.

My letter to the artists,

When it comes to your work free yourself to dare, and dare to be free. Trust yourself. I know I did during this research project. I have been working with narratives in an effort to elevate the students and teachers' involvement and understanding of their situations within a realm of art-based research practices. Writing as a method for research was never something I had imagined I would do, but as Greene (1995) argued, "our imagination […] requires reflectiveness on our part to acknowledge the existence of the[se] unexpected and unpredictable vistas and perspectives in our experience" (p. 125). What I draw from this is exemplified in the

work conducted with Mario, Romeo and Anthony**,** all of whom have created astonishing visual artworks in conjunction with their letters.

This qualitative inquiry conducted allowed for a multitude of forms in which narratives could be explored. Hasebe-Ludt, Chambers & Leggo (2009) suggest "researchers strategically conduct interdisciplinary and intra-disciplinary research that creates and represents knowledge through multi-genre and multi-media texts that meld fact, interpretation and imagination" (p. 35). As a result of the many discussions, and interviews between the participants and myself, we developed an idea that ultimately served as a hybrid to visual and textual narratives, exploring the theme of *identity*. Essentially, the students were asked to contribute to the project with visual art, as a mode to understanding how the students themselves conceive of art using quotes, making narratives an integral component to aesthetics. We collectively engaged with the process, and asked ourselves: How can the theme of identity be creatively interpreted? The results from this were astounding; the students had eagerly engaged with this concept, that they took copies of the transcripts, studied them before adding sentences, quotes, statements and even paragraphs into their visual works.

Serving as an alternative platform for engaging the students in this creative, research endeavour, the students conceived visual and conceptual works that embodied the notion of *identity* as intertwined with a series of narratives. Of course, the works proved to be truly unique in their own right, and the students created works for which they were able to apply and integrate their previously acquired knowledge and expertise of the arts. Mario, who seemed to have a lot of difficulty thinking about how to come up with his visual work, decided to cut sentences from his transcript, and collage them onto his canvas in an explosive arrangement and under which he created a galaxy-like background with spray paints.

Figure 1. Mario. (2017). *When Words Collide* [Spray-paints, canvas, paper and glue]. John F. Kennedy high school.

Meanwhile, Anthony, who had a much different take on his piece, decided it would be a good idea to incorporate newspapers and prints into his visual piece, along with some of his own words from the transcripts. In all, Anthony chose 4 paragraphs from his transcripts that narrate (in sum), 1) The impact painting has had on his life; 2) His past experiences with drug-use; 3) Memory of a certain artwork that he painted; and 4) How he perceived the role of an artist when he was growing up. His artwork, including a wide array of colours, incorporated the narratives alongside the bold paint strokes, and spoke of his creative, painterly aptitudes and conceptual abilities.

Figure 2. Anthony. (2017). *artwork*. [Acrylic paints, glue, newspaper, paper]. John F. Kennedy high school.

Yet, I consistently ask myself, how did we, as a group of artists, come to execute such work? In all fairness, even I, who orchestrated this research endeavour, could not have envisioned the process and unexpected evolution to the extent of which it grew from narrative inquiry, and how the textual letter writing transferred into visual artworks. But I am getting ahead of myself. Let us start with the foundations: Mario, Romeo and Anthony have all been students of my visual arts classes wherein collaborative work through a project-based teaching and learning model serve as dominant creative forces. It is my belief that the students that partook in this artistic research endeavour critically understood project-based work, which can be defined as "a student-driven, teacher-facilitated approach to learning. Learners pursue knowledge by asking questions that have piqued their natural curiosity" (Bell, 2010, p. 39). As such, the learners recognized an aperture for creativity that easily and readily went beyond textual narratives.

They demonstrated an ability to provoke a particular teaching and learning agenda through being immersed in a space where the arts are clearly valued, extending to a deeper understanding of arts-based practices, for as Greene (1995) claims, "informed engagements with the several arts is the most likely mode of releasing our students' (or any person's) imaginative capacity and giving it play" (p. 125). As an artist myself, the students, teacher, and I continuously discuss the many forms of art, and engage in critical conversations about what art is, and how we can define it, in today's society. I feel that it is crucial to invigilate such conversations in order to help the student, become informed, critical agents of art, culture and society. In so doing, I found myself mentoring them in ways that both facilitated their learning and my study, by responding to questions students had about their work, and discussing the many facets of art that surround us today, in turn, helping students to find their place within an art subculture. Applying methods of deep listening through meaningful conversations, Snowber (2005) discusses the many forms in which we can be tender to our students and provide them with care through mentorship.

As such, time spent on the field, conversing with participants while crafting their stories into a series of heartfelt letters, invited me to better understand the intricacies of their situations, as social beings who matter, who make a difference, and who are able to generate change through their creative and thoughtful experiences. After all, Snowber (2015) claims:

> All art teaches us to stop, look and listen to life on this planet, including our own lives, as a vastly richer, deeper, more mysterious business than most of the time it even occurs to us to suspect as we bumble along from day to day on automatic pilot. (p. 347)

In this case, the students 'artworks became testaments of their creative skills. Although many students have expressed shunning the acts of reading and writing as part of their academic discourse, they understood and displayed a visual language through the creation of their artworks that stemmed from the written stories. It is my belief that Mario, Romeo and Anthony have developed an affinity to create, and conceptualize artworks through their ongoing engagements in various art projects at the WOTP program, including this research endeavour. Their stories became research stories. Furthermore, they have been able to discuss their art, as well as those of others during the interviews. Greene (1995) argued that "aesthetic experience requires conscious participation in a work, a going out of energy, an ability to notice what is there to be noticed," and in my view, that certainly took place in this study (p. 125).

Thus, the visual works conceived in the process of learning and in response to the letter-writing enacted an embodiment of lived experiences as the foundation for this research project. Being immersed in this natural setting (Creswell 2015) where the arts are used as an interdisciplinary tool allowed for their conceptual skills to surface, and they subsequently created visual works that depicted in a multitude of ways, the notions of pedagogy, belonging and identity. In addition, Romeo spoke of his budding artist identity as part of the WOTP program. As part of his carefully crafted story, he stated, "…there are many types of art. And that's what I like most about it. It's very open; you can use your imagination, your skills, whatever you have, and if you're a bad drawer, it doesn't really matter, since everyone has a different way of perceiving art." According to the students, participating in such projects encouraged and facilitated the opportunity to explore the realm of the arts, dipping their toes into possibilities, and raising awareness of the vast, artful potential ahead and they continue to employ their imagination through creative means. As noted in Romeo's letter, "art is about perception," and as I draw this letter to a close, perhaps the arts, when employed through project-based practices, can become much more than a single channel, whereby students employ their creativity and actual knowledge as living, pedagogic inquirers (Sameshima, 2008). Perhaps when students are immersed in artful settings, their senses become more attuned to creative possibilities, and when

artful possibility exists, pedagogic engagement and hope for a more colorful and creative future may prevail.

My letter to the teachers,

I have been thinking very deeply and for quite some time now about how we could change the ways in which we teach art to our students. But why would I think and wish for such change, or, why is it that this is so important to me. The answer is simple: from a personal standpoint, I think it is time we change how we design and deliver our lessons from a standpoint of inclusivity and public pedagogy. As McLaren (2007) noted, public pedagogy is "…designed to help students invest in public life. Not only does it presuppose some notion of the future, but […] it also assists students in locating themselves in a broad range of public discourses" (p. 192). I often reflect, sure enough, no student has ever fallen ill from being bored and passive during class time…right? But they do lose interest in school when bored and passive, as I did at a young age, and as the students in this study have also.

What are the consequences, to the lives of these students, to the lives of their teachers, to the schools they inhabit, and to the society in which they will soon find themselves? In any event, I believe we must all remain critical. What options are there for them? Where are they destined to be? What is my social responsibility as a teacher and researcher, having intimately understood their stories through my own struggles, now that I advance my opportunities? There is surely something we can do about it. At the very least, we can start to think about generating small changes for how we can work with our students, and shed the unwarranted political baggage we bring, or do not bring to our classes on a daily basis. Perhaps we just need to consider the statistics to bring value to the stories we hold:

> In 2012-2013, the proportion of those who left school (general education, youth
> sector) without a secondary school diploma or qualification (annual dropout
> rate) was 15.3% for Québec as whole. It was 18.8% for male students and 11.9%
> for female students. (MEESR, 2015, p. 7)

One of the worrying figures in the aforementioned citation, is that male students are at a significantly higher risk of dropping out in Quebec. Unfortunately, I can attest to this, since in a class of approximately 15 boys that make up the student body of the WOTP program, there is only 1 girl. Perhaps there is still much to investigate in terms of why boys often find themselves in alternative programs. Moreover, there is also further work to do in order to find ways to reach out to the youths, and the boys most particularly, and help those find success. I believe this is the next step in my research trajectory, to investigate more fully the role of gender and alternate programs as this aspect was beyond the scope of this study. Within my research work that I conducted at the WOTP, I was able to understand through my data analysis how Mr. Mr. Tonin, who teaches at the WOTP program has altered his pedagogic philosophy to fit a more challenging educational context that required a certain adaptability. As such, I hold the utmost respect for teachers such as Mr. Tonin. He is a dedicated mentor who has opened my understandings of the challenges and the rewards of WOTP.

In this particular case, it became evident that he, as the principal teacher of the alternative program, allows himself along with his instructional strategies to shift, from teacher-centered, to student-centered, in order to cater to his students' situations and learning needs. In his story, Mr. Tonin notes that "as a teacher, you're still a student and you're constantly learning." He also argues that as a teacher, it is very difficult to help students become better, and that it requires much constant work, but the results of seeing the students succeed in tasks that go beyond academic tests are priceless. This is the heart of a teacher, and while some may suggest this is

idealistic of me, I firmly believe, as Mr. Tonin suggests, while promoting the teaching of real-life applicable skills through project-based pedagogy, we keep a realistic perspective on our purpose, for "it's one thing to prepare to take a test, but that doesn't give you the same pressure, because there's nobody outside of the class other than the teacher who's gonna be looking at that test."

Extending his philosophy, my hope is that as an educator, I will embody the essence of curriculum and its etymology. Stemming from the Latin word *currere* (Irwin, 2003/2004; Pinar & Grumet, 1976, Sameshima, 2008) which contrasts the term curriculum, the latter is largely meant to be static. In effect, currere means "to run" (Pinar & Grumet, 1976) and is also dynamic. Much like Mr. Tonin teaching strategies and outlook on how curriculum is implemented in his classroom as situational praxis, his learning from students was dependent on the reciprocity of his students' learning, thus acting as collaborative 'dwellers' of the curriculum (Aoki, 1980). In my eyes, Mr. Tonin well understood the conceptual premise of the word teaching. As described above, the fluidity in his thoughts, actions, teaching praxis and plans as part of the curriculum resulted in his students speaking very highly of the program he has commandeered for years, as well as of him as an educator. Sameshima (2008) has further argued:

> *Currere* is about movement, about awareness, about acknowledging learning through the body. […]. That notion must be extended to the teaching self—to embody learning, researching, and teaching that way. A refocus of ways of being a teacher and incorporating currere as an integral part of pedagogic living is critical to transformational teaching practice. (p. 32)

In essence, Mr. Tonin teaching praxis shifted as he encountered the integration of the arts programming within the WOTP. In his case, he was not particularly familiar or comfortable teaching the arts, and yet through our collaborations, Mr. Tonin invited the arts to become integral to the WOTP, and in the process learned how the arts were taught, but also sought to find ways in which he could better his teaching practice by using art as an interdisciplinary tool. And I did the same, observing Mr. Tonin as a mentor, thereby making my apprenticeship as a teacher richer and stronger.

Much like Mr. Tonin, I began to realize that it was critical to breakdown the hidden barriers that limit teachers and students. As such, Sameshima and Irwin (2008) noted that "overcoming the egocentric view amounts to realizing that a center is not always in the middle… More often, the environment is dominated by other centers, which force the self into a subordinate position," and as I look back, I believe this was indeed in play during this study (pp. 5-6). What can we learn from this? Perhaps that education, and most of all, teaching, is a democratic act that often needs to change or be re-adjusted in the moment. My research only serves as mere fraction of work that could be developed. The essence of the work is to look for ways in which we can render our students, and ourselves, as educators, more engaged in the practice of learning and seek ways we collaboratively take on such challenges as a community of inquiry.

It is important to note that times are changing, and rapidly, I might add. Why then is it that the structure of education remains the same? Should we not find alternatives and emergent pedagogic actions, in order to salvage the innate good that constitutes education? This project that I have conducted at the WOTP captured the essence of such change, something Mr. Tonin witnessed and experienced himself, as I did, and I believe the students and principal did also, through the arts. As such, every situation will differ, but I am convinced that change can occur if we dare to change our ways, and become caring and attentive artists, teachers, and researchers in the process. I am often reminded of Kincheloe's (2012) words whereby he claims that "to embrace hope in this era of cynicism is a revolutionary act. But as long as we can formulate visions, possibility persists" (p. 2).

Concluding remarks:

Entering this research foray was quite a test for me. I have seen myself grow throughout the project as I gained much experience conducting research, as well as to note an in-depth understanding for alternative art programs in Montreal I come to the end of this paper with an understanding that conducting research is no easy task. It became very challenging at times, but it is rewarding in its own right. Not only do I feel as I have strengthened my teaching praxis, but I was also able to document the learning that occurred, the innate good, if I may be indulgent, that is part of the WOTP program, along with its participants and my own creativity. In capturing such a rich dynamic of learning and teaching, I was honoured to orchestrate an artistic, critical and informative experience in my narrative inquiry. From this, I stand proud today to have had the chance, knowledge, opportunity, and privilege to have taken on such work. Yet we must continuously remind ourselves, as cultural workers, to continue to diversify our teaching practices, to be bold, to dare, and to demystify the notion of what art actually is, and to democratize for whom it exists.

In finding new alternatives and pedagogic actions within the public educational sector, this study has shed light on traditional hierarchies in teaching and learning in an effort to oppose educational normalization by highlighting alternate pedagogical paradigms employed in this case, at John F. Kennedy high school. In other words, I reflect on the ways in which teachers can strive for change within their classroom through an offering of pedagogic alternatives, but most importantly, why we need to change the ways in which we teach. As evidenced in the stories of my participants: Mr. Tonin (teacher) and Mr. V (administrator), students like Mario, Romeo and Anthony, and my own story, such understandings and allowances within the institution of schools has become critical for many youths who I believe have been marginalized, sometimes unjustly. As participants in this narrative inquiry, we collectively became active agents of change by engaging in a reflexive, pedagogical research practice that advocates for democratization of curriculum and instruction, and identity construction within the public educational sector.

It is our duty, as artists, teachers, and researchers, to share our understanding of the world seen from different views, and to build bridges in an effort to interconnect communities. I wholeheartedly honour the idea that a good educator can embrace knowledge and students together, but a great teacher shares that knowledge and constantly seeks to refine and redefine the learning and teaching boundaries. My research as well as this paper, is only a fraction of what could be, perhaps as all research is always partial. In this paper, I do not propose conclusions, but rather, an opening for conversation, or a sharing of my insights in hopes to shed light on new perspectives for the future of art education. In the end, I believe we need to start thinking about reform in the educational system, that is, changes in how we teach, changes in how we treat and see our learners, and changes in what we do. After all, my research project taught me this: it is all about possibilities, imagination, and shifting the paradigms and the horizons ahead. I invite you to think about, and possibly make changes in your praxes. Perhaps the question remains for us all, what changes could you make, and what changes will you make?

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