

Reflections on Teaching and Learning the Creative Arts: Performative, Textual, Visual

John J. Guiney Yallop, Acadia University

johnj.guineyyallop@acadiau.ca

A few years ago, I developed a creative arts course as part of our Bachelor of Education program at the university where I teach. The purpose of the course was to introduce pre-service teachers to the practice of teaching the creative arts in elementary schools and secondary schools. During the course, I wanted the pre-service teachers to become familiar, and hopefully more comfortable, with both practicing and teaching the creative arts. I planned the course in such a way as to ensure that all students had time with each of the three groupings of arts I had included in the course description (performative, textual, visual). Not very surprisingly, many of the pre-service teachers who took the course initially thought of the arts as simply visual, and usually just drawing or painting. Some students who came with a background in performance felt comfortable in that area but were often much less comfortable in any of the arts outside the performative arts. Most students had trouble thinking about textual as being in the creative arts at all, or being in them in the ways that performance and visual were in them; i.e. with evocative images and movement.

I divided the class into three groups. During the course, each group rotated through the three classifications of performative, textual, and visual, with each group beginning at a separate type of the creative arts and moving through the rest. The tasks were to decide on how to represent the theme (sometimes chosen, sometimes given) and to prepare an installation and/or a performance of their work. Groups could decide to do one large piece or a series of smaller pieces, and they had the option of working completely collaboratively or working individually; if the latter was chosen, one part of the challenge was that the complete work was to be presented together and had to be connected to the theme. After deciding on the themes, or deciding if the themes would be chosen by the groups, and following some initial discussion in the larger groups, students usually spent the rest of that session deciding how to proceed and getting on with the initial stages of their work. Often students moved quickly into the creative tasks specific to their group (performative, textual, visual), while others took a bit more time in the decision-making process. The session that followed was also usually devoted to this work. The completed work was then presented in the next session. I circulated among the groups; sometimes I stayed out of the way until called on for help or guidance. At the end of each session, students were expected to submit an individual creative reflection (performative, textual, or visual) sharing how they experienced that session.

Each time I taught this course, I was impressed by the quality of the work and the growth of the students. Some who began the course with comments such as “I’m not creative; I just want to learn more about the arts so that I will become more comfortable with teaching them” invariably ended the course with the realization that they are, in fact, creative and that part of their learning was (re)discovering and (re)exploring that creativity. Students who entered the course with various artistic competencies and comfort zones discovered that they were very much able to develop other competencies when they moved outside those comfort zones. The themes were always creatively explored and uncovered dimensions/perspectives not previously

considered or expressed. In order to create an environment where risks were taken, I found that providing lots of materials for the students to explore and work with was important. Also helpful, in my experience, was forming the groups in advance; this allowed me to ensure that both elementary and secondary pre-service teachers were in each group, and that the groups were not formed around previously established friendships/acquaintances.

I acknowledged to the students that, as a poet, with very little prior experience outside the textual arts, I sometimes felt that it would be easy to judge myself as inadequate in teaching the course, even though I had developed it. What I reminded the students (and myself) of, however, is that we can always rely on our strengths, and our most natural abilities, but that we must also push back against the less helpful, and less natural, judgements that prevent us from exploring other possibilities. My teaching, just like the sentence that precedes this one, often uncovers what I need to (re)learn or unlearn, as well as what my students may need to know or have disrupted in what they have learned from previous experiences. Opening ourselves, and each other, to multiple art forms, and opening those art forms themselves to other ways of knowing and/or expressing, opens up possibilities in our learning. That learning includes how we might engage with the arts, or how we might weave the arts into each other, and how we might come up alongside those arts, or weave them into the very fabric of who we are and how we live in the world.

Taught to Draw Trees

Taught to draw trees,
I drew the ones that separated
our house from Uncle Joe's
and stopped the fire that could have consumed
our memories a second time.

Was I drawing them back into reality
after they were chopped down?
Or, are they still there?
My memory offers both possibilities.

The movement back and forth of my hand
puts a tree on a page,
one of the many in the woods around our house
where we could disappear into them,
escaping the watchful eyes of adults,
who weren't really watching anyway
because they trusted the trees,
to protect,
to discipline,
to teach.

I could fall,
be dropped,
sit in their shade,
climb to the top of my world,

but they shooed me away
in lightening storms.

We buried Quasar's ashes
beneath one;
our first cat,
planted a tree over him,
so that he could be thrown
into the sky

Gary and I planted one
for our wedding;
we watch it branching
possibilities.

Now words
are my garden,
the woods I enter into;
they throw me
higher
into the air I breathe,
and push me
deeper
into the earth I eat.