Learning Through Play

PORTRAITS, PHOTOSHOP, AND VISUAL LITERACY PRACTICES

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Learning through play is often limited to early childhood education, but this study demonstrates that spaces for creative visual play have important implications for adolescents’ literacy practices and identities.

In the large walk-in closet in the drama room, students rifled through the eclectic assortment of clothes, hats, and props. “It’s like playing dress-up!” exclaimed Tara (all names are pseudonyms), a university student volunteer, “I haven’t done this in years!” Her partner, Divina, a middle school student recently immigrated from the Philippines, had successfully persuaded her to pull on a vintage dress over her T-shirt and jeans. Tara looked to Divina, now sporting a fedora and feather boa: “I think we’re ready. Let’s go take our portraits!”

Around the room, on the stage, and spilling into the halls were other pairs of students and university volunteers. Jamie, an avid baseball player, was posed at bat. Wearing a baseball cap, she balanced an imaginary bat over her shoulders, as if waiting for a pitch. Backstage, Marco, in a safety vest and orange hard hat, used a long, curved piece of wood to pantomime hammering at an imagined construction site. The shapely wooden stick was then passed to Aasif, dressed in a cape, in whose hands it became an apparatus in a rhythmic dance. Seated at a piano in the backstage storage closet, Ife and Maria were concert pianists. Ife, in a floor-length green gown, dramatically moved her hands across the keyboard. “Take a close up of my hands!” she instructed her partner. Meanwhile, out in the hallway, Tara gamely climbed up on a table and pulled slightly to flare her dress. “Good!” exclaimed Divina, pleased with their re-creation of a portrait by photographer Cecil Beaton.

These scenes illustrate the second session—and quest—in a 12-week university-based after-school literacy club for middle school students. The vignettes demonstrate the sense of play and improvisation that we observed frequently, as students, whom for various reasons often felt inadequate as language and literacy learners in school, showed themselves to be creative, confident meaning makers in this space.

The seven visual literacy quests that we had designed were not simple tasks; they posed complex questions about learning and identity, but they also provided students with multiple points of entry, varied levels of support, a range of mentors and mentor texts, options to take more or less risk, and time to reflect—to learn from their process and share their discoveries.
These features were not necessarily intentional but realized through our own inquiry and experimentation in reclaiming language and literacy learning (see Meyer & Whitmore, 2011) for diverse adolescent learners. From such an inquiry stance (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009), we designed this study to investigate several research questions:

- How did our decisions impact the interplay of visual literacy, learning, and identity in a space designed to expand participation through emphasizing experimentation and play?
- How would students mediate the social, cultural, material, modal, and spatial aspects of the program?
- What literacy practices would students utilize, learn, and share?
- What could we learn about designing literacy curriculum, pedagogy, and contexts as a result?

An After-School Program in Visual Literacies: Opportunities and Tensions

After-school spaces are especially well positioned to develop academic language and literacy practices while inspiring imaginative play and productive meaning making (Gutiérrez, Bien, Selland, & Pierce, 2011). This convergence is effectively realized in programs that invite youths to draw on their cultural, linguistic, and ethnic diversity as assets for literacy learning; form groups to pursue their own inquiries, interests, and goals; utilize multiliteracies and new technologies; and learn from peers and more-expert others (Alvermann, Young, Green, & Wisenbaker, 1999; Cummins & Early, 2011; Gutiérrez et al., 2011; Hull & Zacher, 2004; Moll & González, 2004; Pahl & Rowsell, 2010). Well-designed after-school literacy programs connect young people’s learning and experiences across the contexts and spaces of their lives, creating opportunities to participate meaningfully in multiple discourse communities (e.g., Ghiso & Low, 2013; Vasudevan, Schultz, & Bateman, 2010).

The after-school program described in this article was situated in a western Canadian province. The literacy club was one of three components that also included nutrition and sports. Pedagogically, we designed the club to become a hub for inquiry into learning across these three spaces. Thirty-two students participated in the club, representing the linguistic, cultural, ethnic, and economic diversity of the nine urban schools they attended and bringing with them a broad range of interests and life experiences. Their partners were undergraduate students, volunteers from a number of different faculties and programs.

Each week, students were given a new quest through the club’s online social learning platform. The seven quests (see Table 1) engaged the students and their partners in a series of activities using digital cameras to document themselves in action and reflect on

### Table 1: Summary of Quests

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<th>Quest</th>
<th>Focusing questions</th>
<th>Description</th>
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| 1     | • Who am I as a learner?  
       | • How do I learn?       | Students and mentors created interview videos. |
| 2     | • What is a self-portrait?  
       | • How do I represent myself as a learner? | Study of mentor texts and creation of self-portraits |
| 3     | • How are portraits composed?  
       | • How do I edit my portrait? | Photoshop editing of self-portraits |
| 4     | • How can I tell a story about learning through images and words? | Students captured and studied the learning of peers through portraits in the other club components. |
| 5     | • How can I describe what I see in others’ images? | Words were generated using a medicine wheel and then used to tag photos. |
| 6     | • How do I choose the right words for my image? | Students created text for their self-portraits. |
| 7     | • How do I want to publicly represent my image? | Students used images and words to create a poster for public exhibit. |
their learning. Through the quests, we hoped to emphasize the collaboration, resourcefulness, persistence, and problem solving in purposeful play. The quests also referenced the sense of challenge embedded in the philosophy of the after-school program, which encouraged students to try new things, set goals, and celebrate their accomplishments. At the end of the program, a public celebration of students’ accomplishments was held for families, school partners, sponsors, and community groups. The literacy club built an art gallery to feature students’ posters and artist statements.

Our design decisions sought to expand the literacy practices and identities valued in the after-school program so all students might readily engage as text producers and meaning makers. However, our visual literacy approach faced initial skepticism from stakeholders: Did this count as literacy? Would it raise reading levels? Concerns related to school success, particularly for students in low-income communities, are valid and significant. Here (as elsewhere), there remains great economic disparity in graduation rates. One comprehensive study concluded that across socioeconomic groups, if students were in grade 12 and wrote the province’s English language arts standards test, the great majority passed. However, over one third of the students (36%) from low socioeconomic areas had not yet made it to grade 12, and “almost one in five were not in school at all” (Brownell et al., 2004, p. 5).

The goal of the after-school program was to retain young people in school, set goals for postsecondary education, and create a path through school–university–community partnerships for realizing them. Thus, it was important to us that in the literacy club, students would realize themselves as competent text makers, take pleasure in reading and composing texts, and recognize literacy as meaningfully connected to their sociocultural identities.

Conceptual Framework

Play-Based Learning

Research in early childhood education demonstrates the vital importance of play to young children’s linguistic, social, emotional, intellectual, and physical development. In fact, the United Nations includes play as a specific right for all children. In Canada, the Council of Ministers of Education (2010) has stated that “play-based learning leads to greater social, emotional, and academic success” and endorses a “sustainable pedagogy for the future that does not separate play from learning but brings them together to promote creativity in future generations” (n.p.). In early childhood contexts, play is learning, and while school systems rarely make similar statements for adolescent play, research in several areas suggests that a strong sense of play is integral to lifelong learning. For example, research in interest-driven activities such as gaming has contributed to understanding play as “the capacity to experiment with one’s surroundings as a form of problem-solving” (Jenkins, 2006, p. 4).

Play-based learning provides opportunities for engagement with high-level thinking around complex texts. Gee (2005) noted the connection between play and identity, both academic and professional:

A science such as biology is not a set of facts. In reality, it is a “game” that certain types of people “play.” These people engage in characteristic sorts of activities, use characteristic tools and language, and hold certain values; that is, they play by a certain set of “rules.” They do biology. (p. 34)

Visual Literacy and Equity

Foundational to the club’s design was an understanding of literacy as social practice (Street, 1984, 1995). Literacy is inherently dialogic; it is meaningful in, through, and because of our interactions with others, which can occur through many delivery systems: reading, writing, speaking, and listening, as well as through signing, viewing, and thinking (Gee & Hayes, 2011). The multiplicity of delivery systems for language is recognized in the English language arts curriculum in our province, where viewing and representing are as essential as reading, writing, speaking, and listening (Manitoba Education and Training, 1996). However, in practice, the reading and production of written texts still dominate instruction and assessment.

Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) pointed to this imbalance in students’ school experiences where “materials provided for children make intense representative use of images; [whereas] in materials demanded from children—in various forms of assessment particularly—writing remains the expected and dominant mode” (p. 16). Although students must be proficient in reading and writing to succeed academically, “to navigate the real world, they must also be visually literate—able to decode, comprehend, and analyze the elements, messages, and values communicated by images” (Burns, 2006, para. 4).

Participatory Culture

Studies of participatory culture have indicated that learning occurs when there are “relatively low barriers
to artistic expression and civic engagement,” “strong support for creating and sharing one’s creation with others,” and “some type of informal mentorship” (Jenkins, 2006, p. 7), where “members believe that their contributions matter” and feel connected to a community that values what others think about their creative work. Play and experimentation thrive in participatory cultures, social spaces where learners learn with and from peers and mentors.

Through play, learners are also more likely to creatively and imaginatively seek out unique solutions to problems. Jenkins (2006) argued that to fully participate in and contribute to the production of new knowledge, adolescents need to be able to meaningfully engage in creative practices such as appropriation (i.e., “the ability to meaningfully sample and remix media content”; p. 4). Material conceptualizations of literacy practices highlight the agency of youths in changing and improvising texts, “stretch[ing] the affordances of what is possible” (Pahl & Rowsell, 2010, p. 10). In their research in schools, Pahl and Rowsell have found that literacy practices emerging from young people’s work with artifacts contribute to “a space of creativity and improvisation” where new “ways of being and doing can come alive” (p. 10).

Methods: A Practitioner Inquiry Into Learning Through Visual Literacy

Through ethnographic methods of practitioner inquiry (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009; Goswami, Lewis, Rutherford, & Waff, 2009) and pedagogical documentation (Wien, 2011), we sought to study the club to build knowledge about teaching visual literacies through participatory spaces. Our stance as practitioner researchers encompassed the various roles and interests that we brought to the program as literacy teachers, researchers, and teacher educators who had agreed to design a literacy program to complement the sports and nutrition components.

We observed the students during the quests, jotting notes to expand into field notes and share in our debriefings. We videotaped activities and regularly engaged in informal conversations with students, keeping digital audio recorders and cameras handy. For each quest, students produced digital photos, videos, written texts, and other artifacts, including a brief video reflection. These data were managed in a spreadsheet by quest.

Quests 2 and 3 were of particular interest to us, as we had observed such a remarkable engagement in experimentation and play in them. To align our analyses with our methodological and pedagogical interests in visual literacy and practice, we turned to visual discourse analysis, “a theory and method of studying the structures and conventions within visual texts, and identifying how certain social activities and social identities get played out in their production” (Albers, 2007, p. 83). Our initial analysis of the images (274 raw portraits and 40 Photoshopped images) was informed by a multicomponent framework developed specifically for analyzing student photographs (Honeyford, 2013). In response to the guiding questions for each component—pedagogical context and purpose, boundaries, concrete/material attributes, abstract/symbolic attributes, values, subjectivities (identities-in-practice), and relationships to other photographs and practices—we wrote thick descriptions and analytic memos.

A second phase of analysis focused on students’ participation in these quests: What literacy practices did they call on, learn, and share in producing their portraits? How had they mediated the spaces, media/tools, participatory structures, and practices in these quests? We created a data matrix (Miles & Huberman, 1994) of concepts that had informed our initial design of the program (see Table 2, “Designed”) and then focused on the synergy among the materials, practices, and visual discourses in the self-portraits (Wohlwend, 2009), asking questions such as these: How had students taken up, resisted, and expanded these designed elements? As a result, what new spaces, media/tools, participatory structures, and literacy practices had emerged? We added to our thick descriptions and created a second column in the data matrix (see Table 2, “Emergent”), conducting both levels of analysis first independently and then reviewing, comparing, and elaborating on them collaboratively.

Discussion: Visual Literacies and Learning Through Play

The analyses point to how students expanded the designed elements of the quests in multiple, resourceful ways: They produced new spaces, utilized a surprisingly diverse range of media/tools, and in the process, created new participatory structures. The students took up these two quests as opportunities for creative visual play. What emerged through their play—text play, tool play, role-play, and peer play (see Figure 1)—are valued literacy practices that we
would argue are important to and for a variety of literacy contexts and purposes.

Text play is a form of intertextuality, as students modeled their own portraits after those of mentor texts that they had seen by emulating body positioning, props, and distance (see Figure 2; images have been blurred for confidentiality). Others played with merging ideas from self-portraits that we had studied as visual mentor texts, such as experimenting with taping their faces (à la Gillian Wearing) and posing in front of a mirror (à la Cecil Beaton). Students also experimented with the genre of self-portraits, playing with props as subjects (e.g., a soccer ball) or creating a series of portraits to tell a story. Text play was also evident in the ways students emulated peer texts, producing or editing their images using costumes, props, and editing effects in ways similar to those they noticed from watching their peers.

Tool play encompasses the practices of improvisation, remediation, and effects play. The improvised use of tools was evident in students’ efforts to use costumes, props, furniture, their bodies, or other tools to perform a function that typically would be performed by something else or to help viewers imagine something in its absence. For example, when Jamie could not find a bat, she posed in a recognizable batter’s
stance. Later, she took great care to find an image of a bat just the right size to paste into her portrait. Tool remediation is the practice of students using the same tools for different purposes, remediating them to fit their intention at any given moment. The wooden stick was one of many such tools (see Figures 3 and 4).

Effects play (see Figure 5) is the imaginative play supported by the effects offered by the tools and functions of the camera and/or photo-editing software and programs. As Rina explained, “I like kittens, so I erased the background and added a new background of kittens that are in a cup….I faded my face to look like it’s really drawn [rather than photographed].”

Role-play encompasses identity play (see Figure 6), the use of material and symbolic resources for the
In some instances, identity play merged almost indiscernibly with character play, the taking up of characters or persona inspired by material and digital resources. For example, in a second image with the same costume, Maricel took up a slightly different pose to convey “a Filipino girl working on the rice fields in the Philippines.” The cowboy hat and stick horse featured in many portraits demonstrated how simple props inspired students to “dress up in different costumes and pretend that you are a cowboy and stuff….My favorite part was dress-up.” Role-play also refers to relational play, which we observed when students redefined their expected roles during these quests. Particularly in quest 3, the program’s distinction between “mentor” and “student” was challenged when the university volunteers realized that they knew very little about Photoshop. Although this posed a bit of a crisis for those who valued the role of “expert,” the students quickly adapted to a more fluid system of collective intelligence, experimenting with the tools to figure out their effects and then sharing their newfound expertise with others.

Peer play includes meme-driven peer play, as when students emulated patterns that they observed in the photography and editing work of others to contribute to creating memes across the collection of portraits (e.g., a pattern of horse play; see Figure 7). Story-driven peer play involved two or more students engaging in storytelling, typically through a series of images but also through images of identity. Mia’s portraits focused on her identity as a soccer player. Her portrait featuring a soccer ball being contested by two players was inspired by her idea “to make people think about a kickoff. I want to show people that I really love soccer and that someday I really want to become a real soccer player.” Maricel reflected on a portrait of herself posed in a long, brown skirt and rice hat, her arm extended gracefully to hold a straw basket: “This picture describes my Filipino culture and background.” Louisa, in an orange hard hat, hammer held behind her head, commented, “I always use a hammer at home. I like holding a hammer….It makes you think about being an architect.”
taken to capture a moment in a larger narrative event. In this case, the visual worked like a silent film or wordless book, as students composed pictures to “show stories,” inviting their audience to “look at the pictures and see the messages of what the picture is telling.”

Implications

The skepticism that we faced initially about designing a visual literacy program (rather than a reading program) surfaces tensions in public discourses and in schools about what literacy is and what students need to be taught. Students, particularly those from low-socioeconomic areas, receive literacy instruction that is highly skills based and reading and writing focused, and yet, because it is often decontextualized from authentic purposes and forms of communication relevant to students’ lives, they continue to perform below their counterparts in higher socioeconomic areas. Inviting students to experiment and play through visual modes cultivated a strong sense of agency: As students realized the affordances of the tools and media, their texts became more nuanced and complex, and the many decisions they made along the way contributed to building their confidence as meaning makers and text composers.

In choosing to use digital cameras, it was important to us to immerse students in the discourse of photography. This surfaced important academic concepts, such as point of view, which we discussed as we looked at each of the mentor texts. Yet, far more powerful was how students realized point of view through the production of their portraits, as they made decisions about how to position their bodies and the camera and considered the impact of those decisions on viewers’ interactions with the portrait. The students came to understand point of view in the process of visually communicating their ideas; a rather abstract concept became part of their discourse, related to other important concepts, such as distance, angle, and shot. As a medium, digital photography afforded different participatory structures than might typically be used in the classroom to teach and learn concepts like point of view. Although similar to the kinds of decisions about point of view and perspective that a writer would make, the visual and participatory nature of the quest allowed for multiple entry points for students who may be disengaged or disenfranchised from the process when only print text is used.

Although students in the club were novice photographers, we did not provide them with simplistic mentor texts. The exploration of rich mentor texts allowed students to see powerful compositions and experience the impact that artists’ decisions had on them. The artworks inspired students to envision what their own self-portraits could be, similar to the way a powerful essay or poem can influence writing. We believe that youths need to be immersed in reading, writing, and viewing texts that make them wonder; make them stop and think about the beauty of a sound, word, or image; and inspire them to create their own works of art, not simply to select the best answer. While editing her portrait, Ann explained, “I want viewers to see a girl riding a horse near the mountains. I want her to be smaller than the mountains. She is out berry picking.” Later, in her artist statement, she wrote,

To make this portrait, I made a mountain background with a berry bush. I then used the painting tool to draw a horse from the horse head that I posed with. Next, I made the layer smaller so I fit in the background. Then I put the layer of me in a horse on top of the mountain background.

Students were engaged in reading and writing in purposeful ways, communicating to their audiences their decisions as artists and composers.

In focusing on productive literacies with creative and imaginative potential for play, we see students’ agency not only as photographers and photo editors but also as learners. In these quests, they negotiated their learning; they fully utilized their peers and others to help them achieve their goals: “I’ve learned shot put, the long jump, high jump, and how to do backgrounds in Photoshop….People taught me how to do it.” In the process, students created new participatory structures, much more democratic and less hierarchical. They worked collectively in ways that recognized the expertise they could each contribute (e.g., how to spell a word in Tagalog, use the zoom feature on the camera). They creatively utilized the resources around them.

Students also learned by tinkering, experimenting in the productive space between intention and realization—their desire to do or create and their resourceful efforts to realize that desire. They pressed buttons and observed what happened: “I
learned how to take different kinds of pictures...by trying out different ways myself and adjusting the shots,” stated Zach. Marcus reflected, “I learned so many things about the computer [by] taking some chances.” Through risk, experimentation, and play, students gained knowledge and confidence that they could apply elsewhere: “My favorite part was when we used Photoshop, because now I can help my mom with party invites,” shared Maricel. In the process, students introduced new spaces, tools, and practices for learning that were far more relevant to them than those we could have designed or imagined.

Finally, we believe that literacy identities were cultivated as students realized that there were multiple ways to participate, learn, and succeed. The focus on the visual mode helped level the playing field, particularly for students who are often positioned downhill by literacy tasks in school. Some took big social risks (e.g., dressing in drag), whereas others minimized their visibility and vulnerability (e.g., back turned, no costume), particularly at first. The context encouraged the practice of performance, “the ability to adopt alternative identities for the purpose of improvisation and discovery” (Jenkins, 2006, p. 4).

The low-stakes nature of the quest was also important: Even though students were focused on producing their images, they were not focused on the products. There were multiple products and multiple means of negotiating the process. Moreover, their play evoked pleasure. As Zach reflected, “I... learned how to better my photo-taking skills, by looking at the camera and how it looked, if it was good or needed to be redone....Taking more pictures in different ways, I enjoy that a lot.” The pressures of assessment, often paramount in classrooms, were pushed back in favor of a space that privileged students’ goals and the pleasures of achieving them. Engaging in play through visual modes created opportunities for young people to cultivate and hone literacies that are valuable in school and in their everyday lives.

**Conclusion**

We suggest that concerns about literacy achievement need to be reframed as concerns about the paucity of spaces, media/modes, structures, and practices that count as literacy and that are used in literacy curriculum and instruction. Meaningful literacy practices can be tapped with a modest range of resources in the classroom. However, space and time for this kind of play and experimentation with complex, layered texts has been squeezed out of the curriculum to focus on “priorities,” skills such as decoding and literal comprehension, taught in

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**Take Action**

**STEPS FOR IMMEDIATE IMPLEMENTATION**

Although the context of this article is an after-school space, there are implications for the classroom spaces in which adolescents spend a large part of their day:

- Consider text more broadly. Invite students to make meaning and communicate ideas with multiple media, such as their bodies (e.g., tableau), advertisements, artifacts, sketches, Play-Doh, stenciling, and others’ words (e.g., found poetry).
- Value other forms of literacy. Develop literacy practices through film, art, music, and stage performance, not just as supports for reading and writing.
- Include students in the design. Share learning goals with students and invite them to propose how they will achieve those goals.
- Plan for divergence rather than convergence. Invite students to brainstorm multiple ways that they might explore or communicate a concept or idea. Thinking in three dimensions or multiple modalities pushes creative and critical thinking and allows more opportunities for students to learn with and from one another.
- Observe the community. Considering literacy as social practice lends itself to assessing how each member is interacting with and responding to other members. In reading assessments, it may be just as important to notice if a student is taking cues from another student as it is to know if that student is independently using cues or strategies.

The after-school space supports many ways of learning and knowing. Opening up the classroom to opportunities for multiple literacies, engagement in design, and social interaction for learning can support and value literacy learning in its broadest sense.
isolation through leveled texts with controlled vocabulary and structure. Rather than narrowing, limiting, and simplifying tasks, texts, and purposes, we need to broaden literacy and language arts as creative, complex, and critical spaces for students to play, compose, and learn. How?

We need to work from the assumption that students have important things to say. What kinds of rich materials and texts are we providing to help them realize their purposes? How are we cultivating experimentation with an ever-expanding repertoire of literacy practices and mentors to realize stronger identities as creative and critical meaning makers in school and in society?

We need to welcome students into imagining and negotiating the spaces, processes, and resources they need to realize their goals. What models are we drawing from to design collaborative spaces with flexible structures adaptable to students’ purposes? How do we embrace a notion of differentiation that is not viable structures adaptable to students’ purposes? How do we embrace a notion of differentiation that is not about getting all students to the same place but about realizing personally meaningful and, sometimes, different endpoints (from what we first imagined or from those of others)?

We need to fully understand the implications of literacy as social practice and design language and literacy spaces as participatory cultures. How are we expanding opportunities for collaborative play and valuing social learning practices (e.g., observing, mimicking)? How do we expand our assessment practices and instruments to appreciate how and what students learn from one another?

Finally, we need to make more equitable the opportunities and experiences that students are provided. These are the kinds of issues and questions, motivated by students’ play, that are increasingly important to us and need to be considered in schools and classrooms.

References


**More to Explore**

- Kennedy, B. (2010). Visual literacy: Why we need it [Video]. Retrieved from www.youtube.com/watch?v=E91k6D0nwM (In this TEDx Talk, Brian Kennedy, the director of the Hood Museum of Art at Dartmouth College, provides a historical overview, a working definition, and a context for the importance of visual literacy.)

- Nell, M.L., & Drew, W.F. (2013). *From play to practice: Connecting teachers’ play to childrens’ learning*. Washington, DC: National Association for the Education of Young Children. (Nell and Drew suggest that teachers need to engage in their own play to better understand and value the impact that play has on learning.)


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