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Curriculum as Medium for Sense Making: Giving Expression to Teaching/Learning Aesthetically*

Margaret Macintyre Latta

I have a personal understanding of the notion of *medium* as a visual artist. My artwork is an idea worked out in paint; a process of interacting with materials. My painting process is a constant exchange between self (the personal) and situation (the contextual). This necessitates participation and involvement. I confront boldly the artistic inquiry ahead of me with a willingness to engage in the imaginings of the making process. Artistic purpose is something to be worked toward, rather than something that is necessarily present at the beginning of the making process. Demands are made of me throughout the creating process—the perception, selection, and organization of qualities and responsiveness to them. Lines, shapes, hues, and textures are combined as I play with balance (symmetrical/asymmetrical), proportion (abstract/real), emphasis (dominance/subordination), movement (real/implied), and rhythm (regular/irregular). These relationships reorganize my painting throughout in an ongoing dialogue. At times, this is a tactile dialogue. My body frequently knows more than my mind can explain. In fact, I often become aware of a painting technique or approach as an intuitive bodily knowing first. At times, the dialogue is visual. I respond to what is happening on my canvas. At times, the dialogue is emotional. I have a moment in mind I desire to reinvent. These dialogues are interconnected and indivisible. Feeling and thinking, the head and the hand, the mind and the body, the private and public, seeing and acting, nonverbal and verbal, are all interactive and interconnecting relations that are alive and vital within my painting experience.

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I think my painting experience holds tremendous possibilities for teaching/learning of all kinds. In reflecting on the significance of the art-making experience to me, I find that what I value is not so much *art* but the experience of making art: an experience that values my knowings, interpretations, and expressions; an experience that involves me in constructing meaning for myself; an experience that relies on dialogue and participation as a means to this sense making; an experience that has to be felt and lived through as a whole. In so doing, I find myself absorbed in relations that could never be reduced to rules. Rather, judgments are made on an ongoing basis, always searching for a rightness of fit. The creating act positions me in between the content of my painting, the materials I work with, and the form it takes. And, it is within this in-between position that I realize that at some point the material of paint becomes a medium precipitated through the act of creating. This sense of medium as a vehicle for learning is what I refer to when I say *curriculum as medium for sense making*.

Just as I spoke of my painting materials, there are curriculum materials—programs of studies, curriculum guides, textbooks, newspapers, Internet, interactive CDs, videos, all sorts of equipment, tools, novels, music, posters, objects, lakes, ponds, fields, street corners, and the list could go on and on. Often teachers find security in curriculum materials as a comforting source of activities and tasks. But, rather than focusing on the external attributes of these materials, the focus of curriculum as medium becomes the process of traversing, through dialoguing and negotiating, interactions between self, others, and curriculum materials. How do curriculum materials become mediums for learning? How can they incite dialogue, negotiation, and interaction?

To consider this, I reexamine a grade seven humanities lesson I observed to position students similarly to my painting experience, in between content, material, and form, demanding participation. Such an in-between position becomes the problem of content, material, and form that Bakhtin (1990) grapples with. Content is what work is about, material is the concrete and abstract matter out of which work is constructed, and form comprises the relationships in work between self, content, and materials.

The data represented in this chapter are part of a two-year inquiry conducted at the Creative Arts Centre, Milton Williams School, Calgary, Alberta, Canada, a middle school with a mandate to infuse the arts-making processes across the entire curriculum (Macintyre Latta, 2001). In so doing, they are deliberately attempting to take up curriculum as medium for sense making. I see students in this grade seven class experiencing an independence between self, con-

tent, materials, and form. There were 26 students and their parents, 3 teachers, and 2 school administrators participating throughout the inquiry. The data consisted of ongoing interviews with all participants, student work/artifacts, teacher work/artifacts, and classroom observations. To explore the in-between position created through grappling with the problem of content, material, and form, I examined separately the particulars of content, material, and form in this specific lesson. I searched for insight into the parts that contribute to the whole, cognizant that it is the interaction of all parts (and not their separation) that creates the movement, becoming the medium for sense making. The quotations of students in this chapter are from my field notes (November 1998).

Content

Lorraine (the teacher) has her class studying the novel *Tunes for Bears to Dance To* (Cormier, 1992), about a family dealing with grief over the loss of a son and brother, as well as the relationships a central character finds in a new situation and the abuse of power that arises. Lorraine's past teaching experiences with this novel tell her that it is a good choice for eliciting discussion, confronting many social, moral, and political issues. The content of this particular lesson is specific to the authors development of characterization—but it is definitely not a distinct, fragmented lesson on it. Indeed, taken as an isolated learning experience, I surmise that it would neither have nearly the impact nor hold the significances for learning that I witnessed. This lesson connects to previous lessons and will press forward into future lessons. Connectiveness is a deliberate aim for Lorraine. Content is understood to be a connecting thread that she tries to position each student to locate and weave between self and content, sense making and remaking.

Lorraine introduces characterization at a time in the novel study when students have developed some sense of the various characters in the novel. Doris is a character who has elicited varying responses from her students. Lorraine recognizes that Doris could serve as a vehicle for students to confront their mental images of this particular character, consider why they hold specific images, how the author furnished those images, and the consequences of those images for personal understandings of the character, given the context of the novel. Characterization, the content of the lesson, is thus not understood as a generalizable, imposed belief statement, but rather as a notion that Lorraine expects students to enter into relationship with. Bakhtin (1993) portrays such entering into relations as occurring through events to be lived out, enacted, or achieved, in which what is given and what is to be achieved, of what is and what ought to be,

of being and value, are inseparable. All these abstract categories are constituent moments of a certain living, concrete, and palpable (intuitable) once-occurrent whole—an event (p. 32).

In other words, content is oriented through actual experiencing, demanding interconnections between self and other. Bakhtin further emphasizes:

Content, after all, does not fall into my head like a meteor from another world, continuing to exist there as a self-enclosed and impervious fragment, as something that is not woven into the unitary fabric of my emotional-volitional, my living and effective, thinking-experiencing, in the capacity of an essential moment in that thinking-experiencing. (p. 33)

Content comes to be understood within the act of participation in events themselves, thus characterized as unique, lived, embodied, and contextual, wholly dependent on self-involvement. It is within such event creation that Lorraine hopes the content of characterization will take on lived meanings for her students.

Materials

Participatory thinking realized through the act or event asks Lorraine to find ways for students to enter into the depth and complexity of content—characterization. Lorraine chooses not to do this through a routine class discussion. Rather, she has students rearrange the room so that desks are grouped around a central area. A student volunteers to stand in this area and assume the persona of Doris. Lorraine asks students to consider the mental images they have of Doris and to have the model position her body with appropriate mannerisms, postures, clothing, and facial expressions to shape her into the character from the novel. The model holds the position as students are instructed to study the character they have created. What does the body convey? A seriousness takes hold of the class and is not disrupted. Students focus their attention on Doris. The classroom falls silent. It is not an awkward silence, but a purposeful silence. The students are familiar with Doris. Lorraine asks them to thoughtfully consider the authenticity of the Doris before them. Lorraine then asks students to translate these feelings into a series of gesture drawings that capture their impressions of the character. These are very fast line drawings that denote action and feeling only. I see students absorbed in translating feelings to paper.

The concrete materials integral to participatory thinking are particular to the learning event. For this event Lorraine has the drawing materials gathered and organized and the classroom arranged appropriately, and students are prepared to pursue the intent of the lesson. I am aware of abstract materials, though, that

seem integral to participatory thinking, bridging between self and the context of the novel, self and the other students' thinking, self and Lorraine, and self and the particulars of situation. The materials manifest themselves as qualities eliciting and fostering learning connections such as:

- *Attentiveness.* Through close observation, and given time to dwell with and in situations, attentiveness is a willingness to be receptive to sensory qualities and relations, perceiving possibilities.
- *Personal Involvement.* Knowledge grows from and is a reflection of lived experience. There are multiple ways in which the world can be known.
- *Emotional Commitment.* Emotional commitment is needed. Learning is about discovery—the discovery being neither an object nor a concept, but rather a feeling or attitude that engages participation.
- *Felt Freedom.* A learning space that allows students some liberties in the ways they choose to engage in subject matter that contributes to a spirit of inquiry. It seems learning needs space and freedom to wonder, question, and reconsider, making room for the creation or invention of meaning.
- *Dialogicalness.* Dialogue becomes the link to sense making. Students' thoughts are actively shaped and determined by the process of thought itself. In this way, thought not only shapes outcomes, it is constitutive of them.
- *Inquiry Guidedness.* Learning is a venture for students and teacher. As such, it requires questioning, openness to possibilities, attentive listening, and responding. It is a search process that is inquiry guided. The process determines the form or manner of representation as it evolves.
- *Projection.* This entails not planning all aspects of learning at the outset. Time is allowed to discover potential and let ideas emerge. This permits possibilities to be included during the search, or for alternative ones to be posited. Without such an approach to thinking, it would seem that imaginative thought, requiring speculation and conjecture, might not be possible.
- *Self-Consciousness.* Relations between self and other are continually addressed, fostering greater self-consciousness.

The interplay of these qualities, bridging self and other, comes to life through Lorraine's characterization lesson. For more than twenty minutes, a pin dropping could have been heard. Lorraine's guidance in arranging the learning

situation appropriately and her alertness throughout to the interactions between students and context contributes to the magic. But the magic is also found within the drawing activity itself. Drawing from the human body can be a vulnerable experience. In the desire for realistic proportions, students are often dissatisfied with their drawing efforts. Lorraine knows this and so emphasizes gesture drawings—as the aim is to capture in a few lines the essence of the human form. The model's face is obscured, so students do not focus on facial features. The concentration required to carefully observe and draw with sensitivity takes everyone's full attention. I observe students adjusting the pressure they place on their drawing tools—sometimes uneven, wavering, soft, broken, gentle, torn, sad, purposeless. A fitting line is required. I almost hear the silent conversations between students and Doris and their gesture drawings. As Lorraine aims for attunement and harmonization within the teaching/learning interactions occurring, students aim to attune their perceptions of Doris with the qualities of their lines. Lorraine is careful to respect everyone's interpretation, and students, in turn, are interested in each others viewpoints. Marjorie, a student, tells me, "Doris is the most compelling character. I really want to strangle her. I cant imagine not standing up for yourself. Yet, I am drawn to her. She perplexes me" (see Figure 1). Bruce, another student, says, "I feel sorry for Doris. She seems so unsure, so broken" (see Figure 2). Simon sees Doris as "a victim that cannot see any way out other miserable life" (see Figure 3).

This exercise provides time for students to dwell on one character, gaining many descriptive words and considering how the author created the character. As they complete a few gesture drawings, Lorraine talks one-on-one with students, pointing out descriptive lines that are particularly faithful to Doris. Students talk among themselves and view each others drawings. They too distinguish what works from what doesn't work. Emphasizing one character has taken students on a search for appropriate words and qualities, extending their sense of Doris. Lorraine furthers this sense as they explore together how the author of the novel created the characterization. Students realize that nowhere in the novel does the author provide a list of descriptors for Doris. Instead, she is described through a series of incidents. A list of these incidents is compiled on the blackboard. Students begin to see that Doris' character is developed in relation to other characters in Cormier's novel. The interplay of concrete and abstract materials bridging self and other orients participatory thinking.



Figure 1

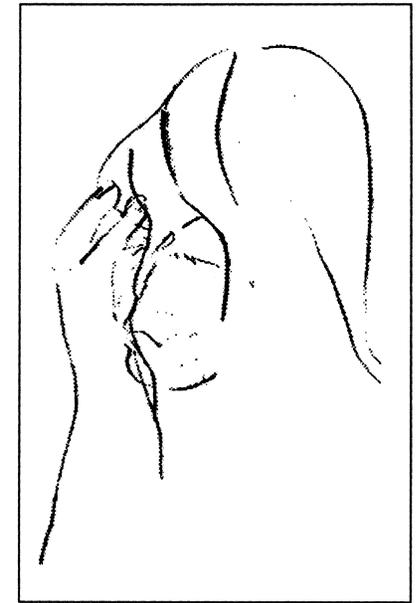


Figure 2

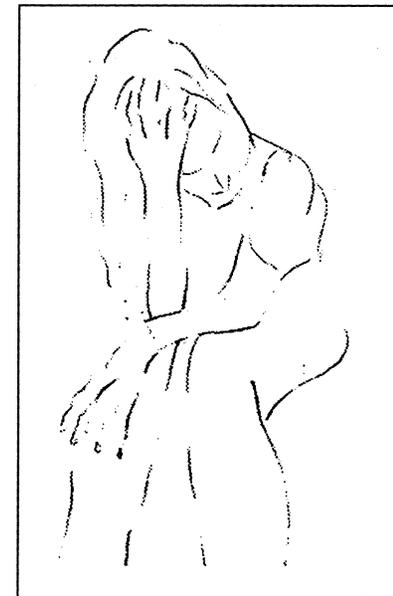


Figure 3

Form

Lorraine creates a path for students, establishing an initial learning direction. She does not allow any time for students to procrastinate about drawing. The pace picks up as she quickly immerses students in the drawing process. This pace is necessary to put any fear of drawing aside and have students attend closely to the work at hand. It is within this process that I see students gaining some understanding of the teacher's intentions. When belief in process is present, students show curiosity, interest, and commitment that absorb their attention and establish a tempo of their own for each student. After the first few minutes, the path wanders differently for each student. Depending on their vantage point for drawing the model who is playing Doris, some students focus on a masked face with a hidden body in baggy clothes (see Figure 4), while others focus on a drooped head, nearly invisible, with rounded weighted shoulders (see Figure 5). Through one-on-one conversations with students as they draw, I find that different aspects of the story are elicited in their minds and inform their drawings. Hence, there are a variety of chance happenings that students meet and to which they respond. This drawing event becomes a very Serious endeavor for most. As process and product are significant and meaningful in Lorraine's classroom, faith becomes a shared experience as students relay their reflections and considerations to each other. All are propelled forward at different rates, in different ways, in leaps and bounds, with stops and starts. It is a movement that demands that students and teacher attend to process and not solely to end product. The movement is generative, inquiry guided, attentive to particularities of experience, and open to possibilities.

Lorraine perceives her way into, and not away from, the learning event. Demands are made of her throughout the creating process—perceiving, selecting, organizing, and responding as she composes and recomposes the teaching/learning event. Lorraine is attentive, responding to the particularities the event gathers together and calls forth. What becomes clear to me is her importance within this dialogic process. She plays multiple roles. At times she provides instructions to the class as a whole. At other times she is much less visible, involved with small groups and individuals. A few moments later, she is leading an entire class discussion that then dissolves into silent consideration of Doris' characteristics. In asking students to recognize their own values and assumptions and to be prepared to reexamine and alter them, Lorraine incorporates many nondirective teaching roles along with more authoritative ones. Her teaching practice is an ongoing search for attunement and harmonization that requires attention to the many interactive relationships that meet in such situations.

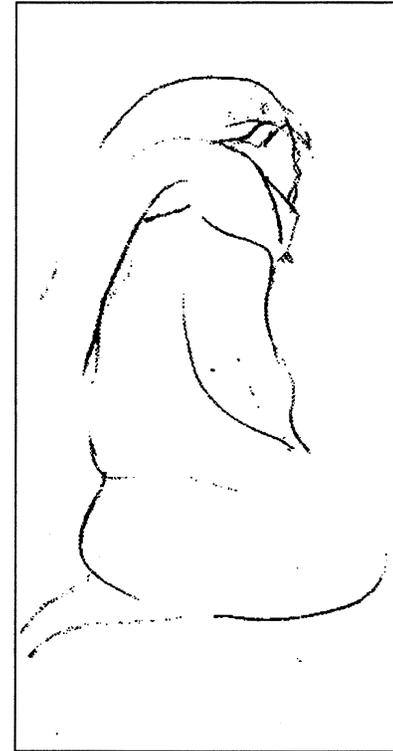


Figure 4

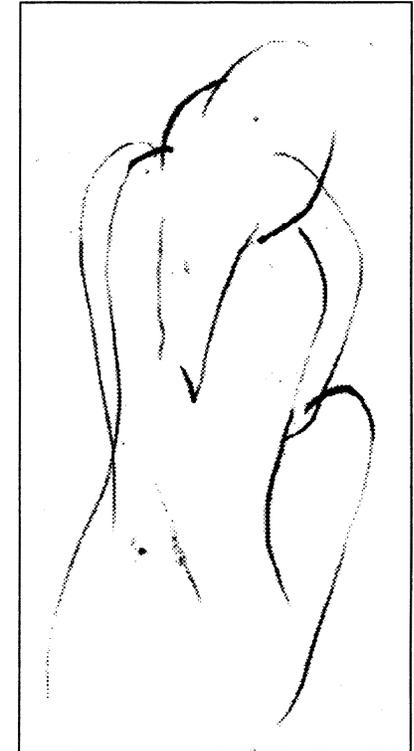


Figure 5

Concurrently, Lorraine also positions students to perceive their way into, and not away from, the learning event. As students succumb to the drawing process and interplay evolves between exterior and interior relations—the head and the hand—thinking and feeling are experienced as grounded in one another. Acting accordingly is then implicit in seeing the concrete situation as it is. Students push beyond mere recognition and labeling of characters in this event. Subtle clues are increasingly paid attention to. Sonia comments that the “dashes that were used [by another student in her drawing] seem to convey a torn character.” Jennifer comments, “Torn is a word that does reveal a lot about Doris. It is a sad word. I hadn't thought about that word in that way before.”

The form for learning grows and takes shape through the interacting process. This demands everyone's full participation. Lorraine's actions speak to her will-

ingness to engage in teaching/learning as a creating encounter. I observe that most students acquire this attitude too. The medium of curriculum in Lorraine's classroom forms as it lives through students' experiences. Thus, the curriculum is neither entirely foreseen nor preconceived, but animated with movement and life. It is experienced differently for individuals and the class as a whole, and yet, I am aware of a sameness in lived sensations that the abstract materials of attentiveness, personal involvement, emotional commitment, felt freedom, dialogical-ness, inquiry guidedness, projection, and self-consciousness evoke. But the primary responsibility is Lorraine's (the teachers) to assume, searching for attunement within the development of curriculum as medium itself.

Giving Expression To Teaching/Learning Aesthetically

Curriculum as medium positions the students to "enter as creator" (Bakhtin, 1990, p. 305), giving expression to their sense making. Vividly apparent to me is the feeling of intense remembering that the drawing event evokes. The gestures enacted by Doris are in turn recognized by students as emotional memories. Bakhtin's description of the internally active human being as creator entering form through seeing, hearing, evaluating, connecting, and selecting takes life (p. 315). "Form ceases to be outside us as perceived and cognitively ordered material; it becomes an expression of a value-related activity that penetrates content and transforms it" (p. 305). Thus, the process is inseparable from the product. Bakhtin claims that this requires participants to:

[k]now how not to detach their performed act from its product, but, rather how to relate both of them to the unity and unique context of life and seek to determine them in that context as an indivisible unity. (1993, p. 19)

Bakhtin (1990) suggests a language that expresses the flux, the movement, necessary to grapple in between self, content, material, and form, fusing process and product into an interdependent, ongoing unity. Within this indivisible unity Bakhtin introduces the language of *answerability*, *outsideness*, and *unfinalizability* for describing involvement in the creating act. He portrays answerability arising out of a fundamental reciprocity between self and subject matter/content. Engagement in learning continually relates to personal understandings and values. The drawing event positions students to answer to themselves on an ongoing basis. Bakhtin explains how this is not derived from a mechanical relationship of parts to whole. "The parts of such a whole are contiguous and touch each other, but in themselves they remain alien to each other" (p. 1). Rather, answer-

ability is dependent on personal involvement. Such involvement necessitates taking "an axiological stand in every moment of one's life or to position oneself with respect to values" (pp. 87-88). Bakhtin further explains that he sees this living and moving "not in a vacuum, but in an intense axiological atmosphere of responsible, answerable, indetermination" (p. 275). Bakhtin's claim is that answerability is not a given, but rather, is a task to engage in and with, through participation in the creating process. The act of creating the gesture drawings gives expression to this. These students invest themselves in these images and their concomitant or ensuing thought patterns. An emotional commitment and involvement expressing what is particular and irreplaceable comes forth from each individual. Through participation, students question. By deliberating and doing, they become answerers. Response entails responsibility; the subject matter starts to matter to these students. Students find themselves confronting their own prejudices, fears, and limitations. This investment of self leads to deeper involvement and greater care. One's distinctiveness from others seems to be a catalyst to enlarged understandings and diverse thinking.

Bakhtin (1986) explains how outsideness makes this possible. Outsideness speaks to his interpretation of the self as fully embodied, a self that is constituted interdependently with the other. Outsideness is experienced through an interdependence realized at boundaries where understandings come up against or meet another. Each needs the other. The gesture drawings image forth new meanings derived through outsideness. These new meanings are tentative, representing moments of clarity but also blurred with unfinished or incomplete thoughts. Students make judgments derived largely on what surfaces during this process.

This is the nature of Bakhtin's (1990) notion of unfinalizability (pp. 121-32). The interaction of self and other is ongoing and ultimately unfinalizable. There is openness to unasked for and unpredictable learnings. Change and transformation are always possible.

It seems that students are positioned to be wholly involved. A space is created for learning that positions participants in between content, material, and form pervaded by answerability, outsideness, and unfinalizability (Bakhtin, 1990). Momentary semblances of meaning come to be. But such semblances are dynamic—parts are always evolving and unfolding into further semblances of meaning. Such teaching/learning situations are always spaces in the making. Meaning is something always to be achieved, striving for possibilities. And it is a learning space only for "those who wish and know how to think participatively" (Bakhtin, 1993, p. 19).

And so I return to the act of creating. It is within the creating act that I pursued the subject matter of my painting. It is within the creating act of gesture drawing that students enlarged their understandings of character development in a novel. It is within the creating act that Bakhtin grounds the very nature of self/other relationships. This grounding within the creating act is the very nature of aesthetic experience. It asks participants to attend to the act of creating within the act of creating and not solely to the creation itself. This is the intimate connection of aesthetic experience with medium. As Dewey (1959) points out, "Medium signifies first of all an intermediary.... Sensitivity to a medium as a medium is the very heart of all artistic creation and artistic perception" (pp. 197, 199). Such sensitivity to a medium as a medium assumes that content means little without contact. This is the nature of curriculum as medium. It occurs through interactions with things, things we call curriculum materials. Thus it is a reciprocal medium involving an exchange between self and other. It is a connective medium, preceding meaningful learning. And it is a transformational medium: self and other change in the process. Within the creating process lives a worthwhile direction, a medium, for teaching and learning that asks students and teachers to participate through adapting, changing, building, and making meaning. Curriculum as medium merits primary consideration within education.

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