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## **A Gallery of Multimodal Possibilities in a Graduate Course on Learning Differences in Education**

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### **Abstract**

Pertinent research literature recognizes the importance of using multimodalities to enhance and extend ways of learning across the curriculum in such subject areas as literacy, geology, media studies, physical education, social studies and disabilities studies. As an action researcher who constantly seeks ways to improve my own classroom practice, I offered multimodal opportunities to the students in my graduate class on learning differences to enhance their capacity to participate in both in-class and out-of-class assignments. Five students representing the areas of nursing, counseling, arts education, and classroom teaching, accepted my invitation to express a major assignment—a personal narrative on learning differences in multimodal forms. With feelings and thoughts ranging from skepticism to inspiration, these five students placed themselves in the vulnerable and risky space of the unknown and represented the theoretical and practical aspects of their narratives via sculptures, beaded canvases, a book of collage art and an assemblage of popular culture. Each student created a unique work woven together from prior experiences, significant readings, and specific theoretical underpinnings. They all agreed that the use of multimodalities encouraged them to draw on various elements of personal resources, such as emotion and imagination, to reconsider learning difference as a multidimensional and fluid concept. The possibilities for multimodal learning in a graduate class allowed students to hear, see, and feel each of their positions on difference while also examining collectively their individual expressions of learning differences in education.

### **A Gallery of Multimodal Possibilities in a Graduate Course on Learning Differences in Education**

*Without warning, the sun tilted into Autumn,  
filling the classroom with possibilities  
of multi-modal learning*

Last fall, I taught a graduate course on learning differences in education to thirty five students representing a variety of areas such as teaching, nursing, counseling, and visual arts. We treated learning differences as an open-ended concept, which we revisited and redefined throughout the course, focusing on such aspects as learning styles, multiple intelligences, language preferences, and cultural background. In thirteen three-hour weekly classes, my students and I delved into a variety of topics ranging from the influence of familial factors on life-long learning to the role that multiple intelligences play in curriculum implementation. According to Albers, Holbrook and Harste (2010), “Whereas many argue that education is in crisis, we would argue that the real crisis is education’s failure to tap the full range of human

potential” (p. 165). As an action researcher who constantly seeks ways to improve my own classroom practice, I offered multimodal opportunities for the students in my graduate class to expand their expressive capacity to participate in both in-class and out-of-class assignments. For example, to help make sense of the various factors associated with the conceptualization of learning differences, we constructed body biographies (O’Donnell-Allen & Smagorinsky, 1999). To gain better access to the origins of our own perspectives on the various discourses of education, we employed handmade literacy (Milgrom, 1992). To gain a richer understanding of the multiple realities of teaching, we responded to poetry using collaborative streams of questions (Leggo, 1991).

For a major assignment, a personal position on learning differences, which required support from pertinent research, current practice, and relevant lived experiences, I gave students the option to present their work as a conventional written paper or a representation expressed in multimodal forms. Five students accepted my latter invitation. With feelings and thoughts ranging from skepticism to inspiration, these five students placed themselves in the vulnerable and risky space of the unknown and represented the theoretical and practical aspects of their positions via sculptures, beaded canvases, a book of collage art and an assemblage of popular culture. Each student created a unique work woven together from prior experiences, significant readings, and specific theoretical underpinnings. They all agreed that the use of multimodalities encouraged them to draw on various elements of personal resources such as emotion and imagination, to reconsider difference as a multidimensional and fluid concept. In this action research study, the students and I ask, “What are the effects of multimodal learning on five graduate students’ pedagogical perspectives and practices, particularly in relation to learning differences in education?”

## ***Background***

### *Defining multimodality*

According to Albers, Holbrook and Harste (2010),

as humans, we are continual makers and shapers of symbols and, hence, meaning. With this in mind, meaning making cannot be viewed as static but as a dynamic process, a way to reposition ourselves as new in the world that allows us to think metaphorically and symbolically and to try on new perspectives (p. 167).

Various definitions of multimodality exist in the research literature. The New London Group (1996), who questioned the traditional practices of literacies and called for “...a much broader view of literacy than portrayed by traditional language-based approaches,” placed emphasis on diversity of literacy modes such as video games, photography, film, magazines, body language, and architectural spaces that embrace such factors as gender, culture, work and

power. Siegel (1995, 2006, 2012), whose critical inquiry into the production and consumption of literacy in our society greatly influenced pertinent research literatures, recently defined multimodality as “the social practice of making meaning by combining multiple semiotic resources” (2012, p. 671). Siegel emphasized that by making use of a variety of semiotic resources to construct meaning, today’s youth play an integral role in challenging the privileged status of language.

In their study on English education in Africa, Stein and Newfield (2006) situated multimodality as a combination of various semiotic modes of meaning making such as language, image, gesture, action, and music, all situated in the social world, including teaching and learning. In particular, they stated, teaching and learning are multimodal and “have the potential to make classrooms more democratic, inclusive spaces in which marginalized students’ histories, identities, cultures, languages, and discourses can be made visible” (p. 11). To investigate children’s response to literature, Short, Kauffman, and Kahn (2000) located the children’s experiences in a classroom that encouraged multimodality or multiple ways of knowing—the sharing and making of meaning by way of music, art, mathematics, drama and language. They found that the children were motivated to “think and reflect creatively...in gaining new perspectives and creating new visions about literature and life” (p. 170-171). Acknowledging prior research on multimodality and aligning ourselves with Short, Kauffman, and Kahn, for the purpose of our study, we define multimodality as a collaborative and individual process in which students make meaning utilizing multiple ways of expressions and representations such as language, sculpture, video, collage, knitting, weaving, mathematical calculations and musical scores.

#### *Review of pertinent research*

Pertinent research literature recognizes the importance of using multimodalities to enhance and extend ways of learning across the curriculum in such subject areas as literacy (Caswell, 2005), geology (Kane & Rule, 2004), media studies (Schofield & Rogers, 2004), physical education (Marlett & Gordon, 2004), social studies (Dowdy & Campbell, 2008) and disabilities studies (Taylor, 2005). In particular, Short, Kauffman, & Kahn (2000) emphasize that the use of multiple modes of expression encourages learners to “think more broadly, to consider other ideas, to connect to memories, and to think through feelings” (p. 170).

Acknowledging that conventional coursework too often concentrates on securing efferent responses, Cuero et al. (2008) asked five teacher education students to use multiple forms of aesthetic representations to explore their experiences of reading comprehension. In addition to reflective essays, the students produced five distinct products—the design of a classroom literacy center, a quilted wall hanging, a culinary display, a musical performance, and a karate kata. Despite conveying initial resistance and tension, the students were eventually able to draw on their background knowledge and interests to establish personal connections to the

reading process. As a result of completing the assignment, the students “affirmed that the aesthetic representations yielded greater insight into the sociocultural and affective aspects of literacy development” (Cuero et al., 2008, p. 19).

During a year when Hansen (2009) was a researcher in a secondary school history class, she encountered a teacher who offered her students multiple means of fostering personal and emotional connections to the subject. For example, after studying paintings and poems regarding the slave trade of the 1700’s, the students became haunted by the harrowing words and images. Their responses set the stage for them as writers who read and write various forms of text. For a unit on the American Revolution, the students wrote speeches that they delivered at a simulated town meeting devoted to unjust taxation by the British. During the course of the meeting, the dramatization allowed history to come alive. To create personal links to World War II, the students created scrapbooks based on personas of those who had either survived or carried out the bombing of Hiroshima. Each one of these multimodal activities allowed the students to then write more thoughtfully and resourcefully about specific historical events in shorter essay forms.

Bailey and Carroll (2010) reported on the use of multimodal and multigenre formats for teaching secondary students to research a person who has overcome adversity. More specifically, as students inquired into their subjects, they looked to an assortment of genres such as poetry, music videos, diary entries, and artwork to obtain the information, which was initially stored in a portfolio, and then selectively synthesized into the finished products reflecting semiotic analysis, creativity, and observation. A student’s response to choosing and using genres to represent important information echoed those of her classmates. That is, the process “helped her to ‘see more’ and ‘look at things in different ways’” (Bailey & Carroll, 2010, p. 83). At the end of the research project, the teacher observed that her students submitted well-documented texts that investigated a topic from many perspectives and then presented the findings in interesting and creative formats. In particular, “they became so interested in the journey that they were willing to learn the skills necessary to take them where they want to go” (Bailey & Carroll, 2010, p. 85).

Finally, Long (2008), wanting to challenge her pre-service and in-service students’ thinking regarding choice in report writing and students’ instructional needs, incorporated a multimodal assignment grounded in critical inquiry and collaboration in her classes. To broaden their knowledge base, students first inquired into their chosen topics using a variety of fiction and nonfiction texts such as newspaper clippings, picture books, journal articles, poetry, photography, and music. They then presented their findings through a visual portrait comprised of written and/or oral text, an artifact as a tactile depiction, and a decorated container representing the topic. For example one teacher selected a miniature oilcan, money

clip and vintage car to represent John D. Rockefeller, while another teacher decorated her container or diorama representing Helen Keller's life with "photographs, bits of fur and fabric, and fragments of Braille that her colleagues could see and feel" (Long, 2008, p. 292). The teachers found that they reached a better understanding of their own pedagogical perspectives and practices regarding the multiple ways in which to explore every aspect of the language arts curriculum in their own classrooms. To quote one teacher, "I have a better understanding of how important it is to use different literacies with my students so that they are fully engaged..." (Long, 2008, p. 294).

### ***Methodology and Related Considerations***

#### *Action research*

Not intending to infer results beyond the study (Hendricks, 2009), but still wanting to investigate a specific practice, while adding to research on multimodal learning, I turned to action research to answer the question "What are the effects of multimodal learning on five graduate students pedagogical perspectives and practices, particularly in relation to learning differences in education?" "Action research, a form of ongoing inquiry into the understanding and improvement of one's own practice (Clay, 1989; Marshall & Rossman, 2006; Reason & Bradbury, 2004) "seeks to bring together action and reflection, theory and practice, in participation with others, in pursuit of practical solutions to issues of pressing concerns to...individual persons and their communities" (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2000, p. 1). As teachers inquire into their practice, the participation of students is an integral part of the process. That is, as research proceeds, students play a collaborative role in providing feedback as they work with the course instructor "toward a common goal—the improvement of student learning" (Mertler, 2009, p. 23).

#### *The course and the assignment*

The course focused on the examination and critical analysis of research and practice in relation to learning differences, with a special emphasis on diverse educational contexts and perspectives. Each session concentrated on specific themes like the social construction of gender and the institutional diagnosis of learning disability, and a variety of educational methods such as group process, reflective exercises, and interactive presentations. One assignment in particular, a position paper on learning differences in education, became the focus of the current study on the use of multimodalities for optimal student participation in our classroom.

For this assignment, students were required to express their positions on learning differences in education by way of either a five-page paper or a multimodal version comprised of self-chosen expressions—like drawings and photographs—accompanied by a written text. As students formulated their positions, they were asked to consider such factors as: (i) their views on the nature of individuals and their behavior, (ii) possible conditions, contexts, and practices

that play roles in the construction of learning differences, (iii) relevant past and current experiences as a learner and/or educator, and (iv) key readings that support their views.

In addition to providing the students with the above information, we also discussed the requirements for the assignment in class on several occasions over the course of the term. At these times, we addressed the notion of using multimodal means as another way to engage in the processing and presentation of their position on learning differences in education. Also, working from the theoretical and practical perspective that multimodalities encourage students to transact in learning experiences as lived-through efferent and aesthetic happenings (Seigel, 2006; Cowan & Albers, 2006; Rosenblatt, 1968), I also used multimodal means to engage the class members in the study of relevant topics and issues during class time. For example, to help consider the various factors associated with the notion of learning differences, we constructed body biographies (O'Donnell-Allen & Smagorinsky, 1999). To gain insight into the origins of our own learning, we employed handmade literacy (Milgrom, 1992). To garner a deeper understanding of the multiple facets of teaching, we reacted to poetry using a collective stream of questions (Leggo, 1991). During these above class sessions, I also made connections between the featured modalities and the role that they can play in expressing and representing class members' positions on learning differences.

### *Participants*

Nolan and Patterson (2000) point out that in action research, "Participants are not sampled or selected in any systematic way, but are part of the flow of normal activity" (p. 8). All students who opted for the multimodal version for their position paper were automatically invited to participate in the study. Five students, representing teaching, nursing, counseling, and visual arts, chose to compose their paper multimodally. The same five students readily accepted my verbal invitation extended in class to participate in the study.

Kim, a visual artist and educator working in the fine arts field, was in the process of obtaining her M.Ed. degree. Nikolas, a candidate in the M.Ed. counseling stream, was involved in a required internship placement. Aileen, a nurse at a children's hospital, was pursuing her M.Ed. degree to become qualified as a nurse educator. Violet and Angela, both recent graduates of the B.Ed. program, were completing their M.Ed. degrees with the view to furthering their education. At the time, Angela was an instructor in an adult education setting. In relation to experiences and education in multimodal expressions and representations, Kim had a formal background in the area of visual arts. Aileen, Angela, and Violet took part in arts and crafts as extracurricular activities, while Nik followed more conventional forms of communication such as writing with pen and paper, or computer.

### *Data collection and analysis*

For this study, two forms of data were used—(1) the students’ multimodal compositions portraying their positions on learning differences in education, and (2) the accompanying commentary that emerged from a two-hour conversation that occurred one week after the submission of their assignments. In keeping with a recurring cycle of reflection, action, and evaluation proposed by Henricks (2009), the purpose of the session was to provide a forum in which the students and I could collectively reflect on their participation in completing the assignment via multimodalities. Drawing from the process of deliberate conversation used by Albers, Holbrook, and Harste (2010) to carefully consider the part that their life-long practice as artists had on their evolution as literacy researchers, I began with some basic questions: Why did you select this medium for your assignment? What did you learn from completing your assignment with multimodalities? How did the assignment influence your perspectives on learning differences? As the conversation ensued, including other relevant questions and comments, our input provided a back and forth movement as we discussed the students’ experiences as a lived-through event or happening (Rosenblatt, 1982). In particular, we came together in what Rosenblatt (1968) refers to as a community transacting with our texts and each other, while offering different responses and alternative interpretations fueled by the efferent—that which is carried away, and the aesthetic—the stirring up of personal feelings, ideas and attitudes, or a mixture of both (Chaplin, 1982). For this particular study, we opted not to audio record our session. Instead, the students interspersed their responses in writing, which they then formulated into commentary alongside the presentation of their multimodal works.

It is these writings emanating from our two-hour conversation as well as the gallery of their multimodal works that formed the working material for addressing the major research question. To thematically plot their responses, I immersed myself in a series of careful readings via a two-part process—(i) the coarse grain phase and (ii) the fine-grain phases (Butler-Kisber, 2010). During the coarse-grain phase, I read the documents several times, while placing their contents into initial categories. For the fine-grain phase, I looked more closely at documents, rearranging chunks of text into more refined categories. I offered each of the five students opportunities to read my analysis and indicate any changes, which I then incorporated into the final version.

### ***A Gallery of Multimodal Positions: Five Students Respond***

In the pages that follow, I include the actual assignments, which the students completed for the position paper assignment, as well as selected unedited excerpts from our two-hour conversation. Making reference to their own experiences, depicted in their multimodal assignments and collaboratively and individually considered in a two-hour session of reflective conversations, the students respond in the pages that follow. Drawing from their experiential palette of multimodal pedagogy, I place their works within the gallery of your



views. Hear, see, and feel the effects that multimodal learning had on each of their own pedagogical perspectives, particularly in relation to learning differences in a graduate course as part of their M.Ed. program.

*Kim*

Contemplated through the senses of a visual artist, I set out my position with both word and tactile images, composed and told in Braille. Reacting, challenging, appreciating, questioning, pondering within the ever-provoking world of the attentive artist, I take the informed and imaginative working material of pen, brush, bead, word, and glue to depict my position on learning differences in education. Initially created to meet the requirements of the course assignment, I eventually exhibited my series of beaded canvases at a local gallery, where visitors added them to their own personal collections. Difference as cultural exchange from class to gallery to collection. My response, inspired by a woman reading Braille in a coffee shop, comments on the difference of communication captured in a tactile internal dialogue seen in words, dots, phrases and rhythmic punctures measured in space. Hear the puncture. Taste the thread. The works write and read at night weaving knowledge into impossible forms, fibers entangled at the end of the line, reflection and action recognizing literacies of Indigenous peoples. Feel the knot catch. A glass bead slides fastened in place. The next time that you enter a coffee shop, visit a home, or stroll along the moving water of a river's edge, regard the various elements that comprise the scene. Difference emerges amidst the minutiae and distinct characteristics of life material re-conceptualized in a world of multimodal means.

PROCESS DIALOGUE

*In a coffee shop I saw a woman reading a book in Braille.  
I watched and wondered—fingers restless to understand.*

PATTERNING A RESPONSE

space



Superimposed

Dots  
Letters  
Words  
Phrases  
Rhythmic  
punctures  
Measured in

Dots  
Letters  
Words  
Phrases  
Linear codes  
Patterning  
thoughts

Dots  
Letters  
Words  
Phrases

Literacies  
Intersect

Dots  
Letters  
Words  
Phrases  
Taste the thread  
Hear the  
puncture



ÉCRITURE  
NOCTURNE:  
LABELING  
2007

First Nations, Inuit,  
Métis, Aboriginal  
peoples, Indigenous  
people, First Peoples,  
Indian, off-reserve,  
Status, Non-Status,  
Treaty, Native...

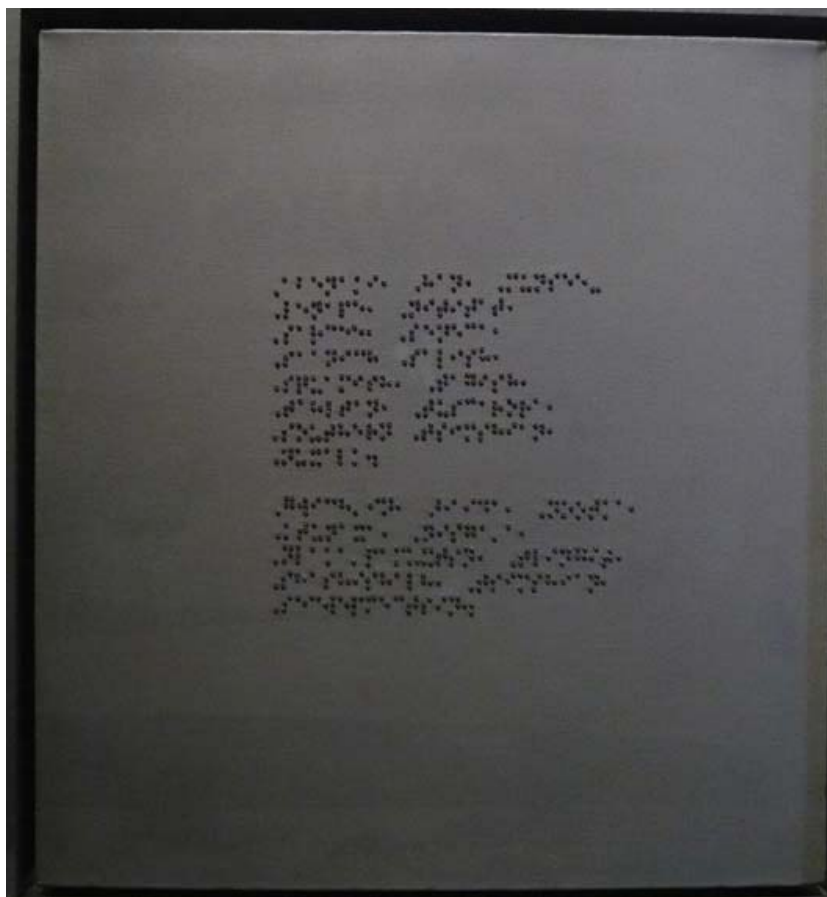
Dots  
Letters  
Words  
Phrases  
Feel the knot catch  
At the end of the line

Dots  
Letters  
Words  
Phrases  
A glass bead slides  
Fastened in place

Dots  
Letters  
Words  
Phrases  
Fingertips  
Performing literacy

Dots  
Letters  
Words  
Phrases  
A blended and  
'impossible'  
Hybrid language

Fibers entangled  
Reflection and action  
Weaving knowledge  
Into impossible forms



ÉCRITURE NOCTURNE:  
ABORIGINAL  
LANGUAGES NEAR  
EXTINCTION AND  
ENDANGERED  
2007

Abenaki, Han, Munsee-  
Lenape, Nitinat,  
Sarcee, Seneca  
Saanich Salish,  
Squamish, Tagish,  
Tahltan, Tuscarora,  
Southern Tsimshian,  
Nuxálk.

Gwich'in, Haida, Nootka,  
Ktunaxa, Nisga'a,  
Nlaka'pamuxtsn, Tlingit,  
Sháshishálh, Tsimshian,  
Secwepmectsin.

*Aileen*

Drawing on prior experience and enjoyment using multi media in my leisure time, I sculpt my position in a community of individuals coming together in the strength of diversity. Each of the following three photographs, featuring seven students representing a variety of learning needs and abilities, invites the viewer to obtain new angles or perspectives on the recurring meaning of learning difference in education. Observe their collective movement gathered around an open well.

*I have always found papers to be very limiting. Often, I find that my written word cannot effectively explain the emotion I feel for the text. I do not feel I would have been able to transmit the same message through writing a paper. Working with tangible material, I could touch, think, and sense the text within me. This model allowed me to unleash my thoughts and put what I have taken from the course into a structure, which I thought, best portrayed my feelings towards what I have*



**A Picture is Worth a Thousand Words**

*learned. A symbolic embodied composition, positioning difference in a circle of unified acceptance. Always in motion entangled in the construction of social and political movement.*





Difference Should be Fostered

*People have different skills, strengths, and weaknesses, and people should not solely be judged or graded based on their ability to write a good paper. Some people may grasp the concept of the course, but fail based on their paper writing abilities.*

*I cannot recall all the aspects I covered in papers written for other classes, but I can recite every reason I had for constructing the modal the way I did. Until an individual has the opportunity to create a piece of art that has true meaning behind it, I believe he or she cannot fully appreciate the concept of using art as text.*

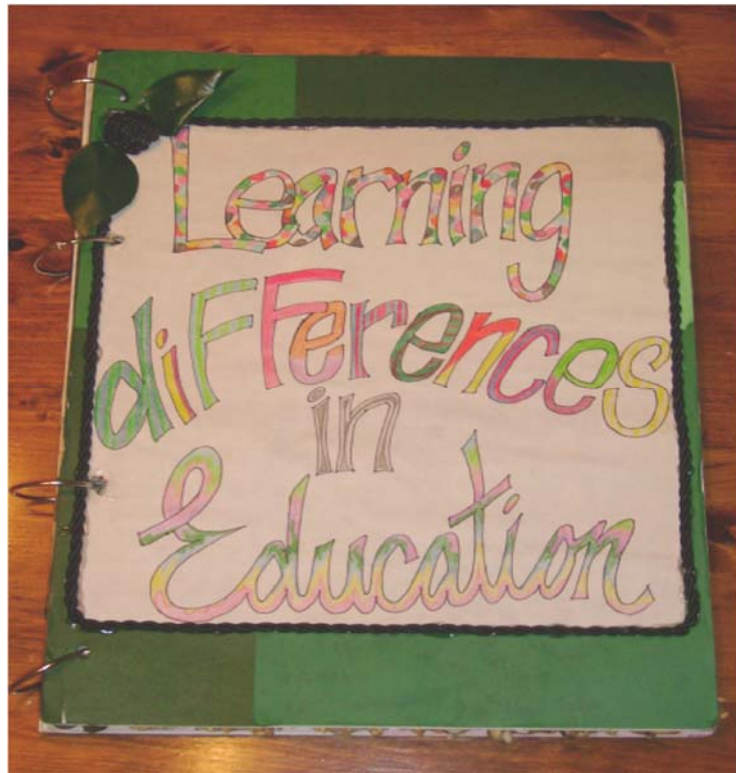


Community as Acceptance

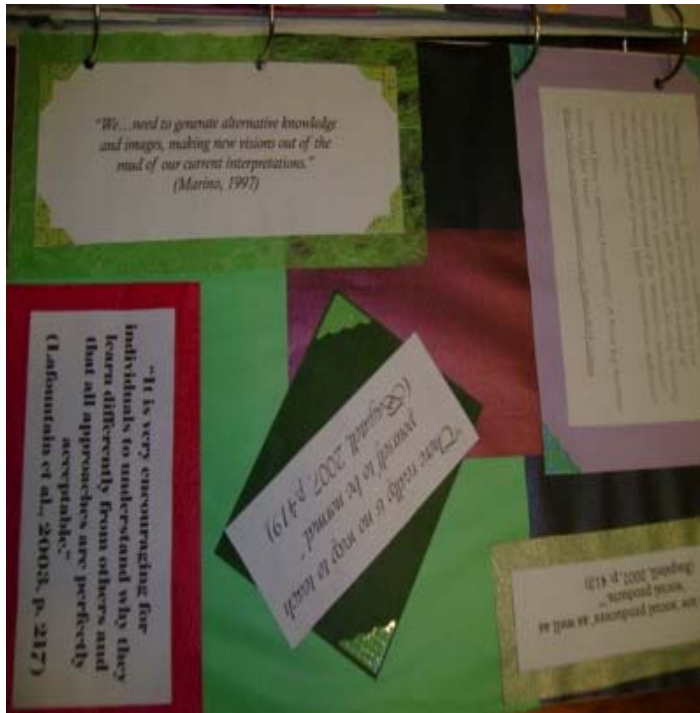
*Angela*

Choosing to represent my position of learning differences in education through a scrapbook of teacher and student perspectives, I wanted to originate something that could portray a major theme that emerged in class, the theme of layered perspectives. I found that scrapbooks can act as repositories of knowledge, capable of evolving as one's views of the world transform over time. When I scrapbook, I surround myself with journals, newspaper clippings, pamphlets and crumpled pieces of paper containing thoughts scribbled in every direction and space. As I hack my way through the bedlam, the piles weaken and the destination becomes clearer. Avenues forming multiple layers of our lives, shape, create and mold our lived lives. When one is able to express learning through multimodal means, what emerges is personal, raw and rich. It conjures up emotions in both the artist and the viewer. For the production of my scrapbook, I convey my position through poetry, pictures, literature reviews and inspirational passages.

*Many things must be considered when one steps outside the zone of familiarity and creates something that is raw and personal. The teacher's evaluation, meeting course requirements and adequately representing research all lay heavily on the creator. Without such parameters, however, the final product may lack the same opulence or content.*



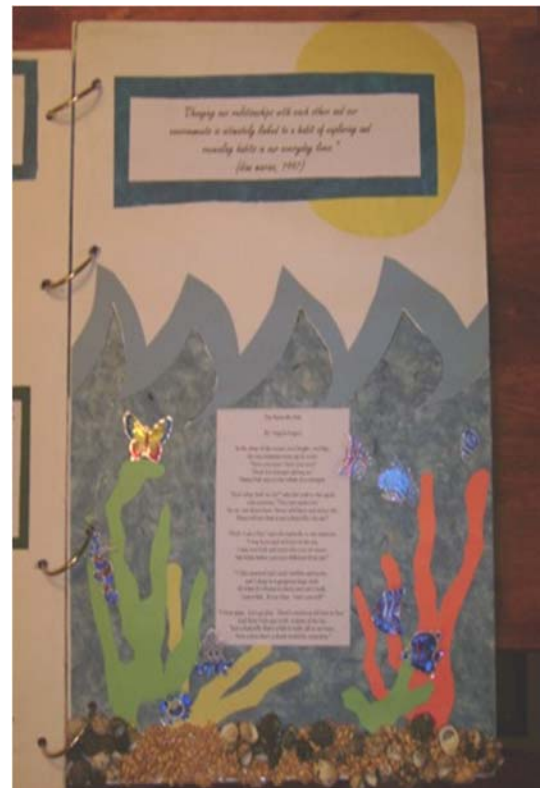
**My scrap: Nurturing an arts-based mind**



My materials of difference

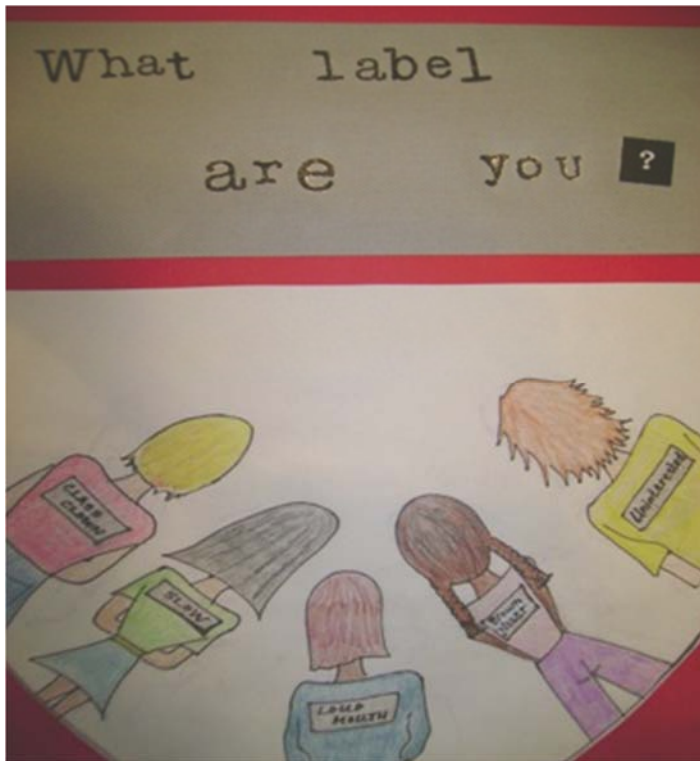
*The multiple tiers shape and mold our beings. The exterior exquisiteness of creation. The aesthetic juices of the soul must be tapped. Yet never with lack of filtration. There will always be a peel, a shell, a crust...The shelter of one's imagination. It cultivates that which lies beneath the husk...A shielding and nourishing foundation.*

*Immersed in journals and newspaper clippings, a sea of rumpled paper and scribbling. My words reflecting research and sapience, consuming all space united in quibbling.*



Multiple tiers shape and mould

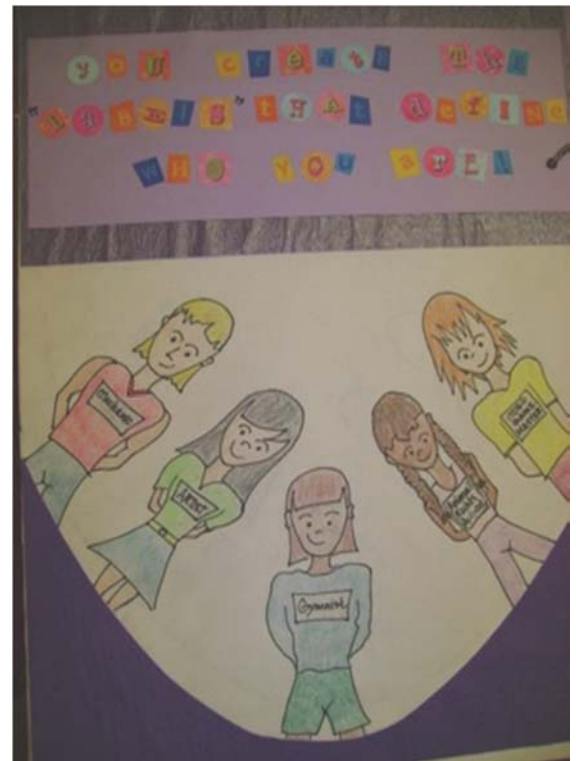




The creation of symbolic work

*Art can be an emotional and immeasurable space for anyone to explore. The challenge and idea of endless possibilities for the elucidation of one's knowledge gained and how one chooses to portray this individual. Understanding can be alluring. The infinite limitations of language can be resisted through the process of art and the creation of representative and symbolic work.*

*An opportunity to ruminate one's thriving art history, Wild and untamed articulation...The richness of layers...the spirit's blindstory...The ability to devise new interpretation. Art may be the purr of the breeze, the whisper of a fire, the rings of the trees. When knowledge is transformed and one is able to see....The world opens up to those who believe. You create the labels that define who you are!*



The world opens up

*Nik*

When I first began the course on learning differences in education, I assumed that the curriculum would unfold like most others—read the required texts, discuss, and finish off with a 10-to-15 page 12-point font paper in APA format. Safe. To my surprise, I learned that students would have the option to submit a creative project that transmitted our position on learning differences in education. The subjectivity of “art” made me nervous: what if others didn’t “get” it? Having not created anything significant that I would call “art” in years, I just didn’t think I could convey meaning and understanding deep enough through such an alternative medium, and, to be honest, I was worried about my mark. I credited the support I received from the professor for finally convincing me to create an arts-based project. It took over half the semester for me to finally feel that yes, she really did want to see what sort of “message” we would create through “multimodalities”. I still, nonetheless, had the problem of actually coming up with something creative. Over the semester, however, I found... *I can’t believe I’m playing with a doll for a masters course.*



**A Different Doll**

*It feels good to do something other than write. Now this REALLY feels like an arts-based project.” Rather than just writing a fictional narrative, I wanted to create a visual aspect to the project. I wrote out the narrative, cut it into long strips and wrapped it around a doll, like a diary entry, to illustrate how a student’s real and perceived learning differences could paralyze them and cause them to suffer. I couldn’t have expressed this message through words alone.*

I still remember sitting in a coffee shop one night, free-writing a journal entry for this character I was creating, when I thought, “This is still just a writing assignment. What can I do to give this “person” physical reality? I decided to take an ordinary Barbie doll, a childhood symbol of uniformity and perfection, and make the narrative of difference hers. First, I formed the typed narrative into one long piece of paper, which I wrapped around the doll like a mummy. From there, I worked many layers of meaning into the project, paralyzing the doll, much as difference can do to a person. I attached labels to the doll and put it back in the box, which I gift wrapped as a nod to the Christmas season and an ironic commentary on traditional toys too often promoting one way of being while ignoring DIFFERENCE.



Wrapped in Labels

*Creative expressions are at the core of the human experience. To focus only on rote memorization and rule-following makes us nothing but brilliant automatons. Laying out information in essays and theses makes it easy to understand, but it removes the most human element of inquiry, investigation and integration of knowledge. Multimodalities allow for and encourage such practices by stimulating discussion and by triggering a human emotional response.*

*Most of the time when I submit papers, I will quickly forget about them. I am amazed that my experience with the multimodal project allowed me to continue to discover new layers of meaning and personal understanding. I more readily grasped the importance of the subject matter, while discovering the personal meaning of difference. Before this assignment, I had a limited view of using art and other modalities in education settings. I now understand that such methods can be a vehicle to encourage learning throughout a lifespan. I am excited to use my knowledge to*

*help me become a better educator and help students achieve their full potential.*

### *Violet*

Since the time that I was a young child, I always enjoyed the tactile experience of creating three-dimensional works, from sculpting in art class to representing patterns through unit blocks in mathematics class. One of my fondest memories centers on a fifth grade project that required me to punch hundreds of little circles to create a butterfly mosaic. I found the experience extremely gratifying as a beautiful piece of art and symbolic representation of my character emerged amidst my love for symmetry, attention to detail, and ability to creatively solve a problem. Recollecting the joy, personal satisfaction and sense of discovery this and other projects brought to me, I decided to express my position on learning difference through a multi-modal format.



*First, I sculpted a tree using metal wire sprouting 8 branches adorned with beads. Each branch represented one of Howard Gardner's multiple intelligences. For example, I represented spatial intelligence by a branch with yellow beads and musical intelligence by a branch with green beads. One of my greatest challenges in creating my multimodal position on difference resulted in the opportunity for me to deepen my use of symbolism. While collecting materials, I came across different size baskets and decided to incorporate their uniqueness into my multi-modal expression. Taking into account the size, color, and state of each basket, I placed beads into their holds, all the*

**Uniqueness in a Basket**



while thinking about the individual's education, environment, social history in relation to their acquired knowledge.

That is, each student brings with them a unique basket of intelligences. The role of an educator is not solely to fill the basket but rather examine the contents – learn about the student's experiences, passions and weakness and build upon them. For example, one of the smaller baskets with a few beads represents a child with naturalistic intelligence acquired through interaction with his grandmother. As he grows, his basket will continue to be filled with beads reflecting intelligences gained via encounters with others.

Another basket represents a professional athlete who dedicated her life to strong bodily-kinesthetic intelligence symbolized by a basket predominantly filled with single colored beads. She also has different colored beads denoting the other intelligences she has acquired, including strong interpersonal and intrapersonal skills gained via her professional experiences.



Multiple Differences



Connections

Multimodal activities allow individuals to weave past memories into newly acquired knowledge to continually recreate a working process that encourages learning in concert with identity study. For me these elements loomed large in the articulation of my position on learning differences in education, where Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences provides voice for my practical presentation.

### ***Pedagogical Implications***

Dowdy and Campbell (2008) state, “When teachers make it clear that they value student creativity the students are then led to understand that their voices are important, regardless of the form in which they choose to present them” (p. 9). In the action of always wanting to improve my teaching, I encountered the voices of Kim, Aileen, Angela, Nik, and Violet, spoken through their expressions of difference, originating from prior experience, and processed by current opportunities of multimodal learning. Angela mentioned, “All of us who chose to work on this paper came from diverse backgrounds and articulated their learning through our different creations.” In addition to these five students’ responses becoming an integral part of future planning and articulation of my courses, we hope that the findings of our research will particularize—resonate with both teachers and learners in “other situations so that they are able to find both confirmation and/or new understandings of experiences and phenomena” (Butler-Kisber, 2010, p. 15). I will now focus on the students’ written and illustrated responses conveyed in the following three sections—(1) personal expression, (2) staying power, and (3) grading.

#### *Personal expression*

When two secondary school English teachers (Baily & Carroll, 2010) co-investigated the use of multimodal and multigenre assignments in their classrooms, they noticed “...students’ motivation comes easily and is sustained through real interest in what they are learning” (p. 85). Such motivation and interest appeared in the work of the five graduate students’ as they each conceptualized and conveyed a distinct position on difference and the part that it plays in our society. The uniqueness of each student’s multimodal composition, including range of materials, written forms, colors, textures and shapes, underscored the value of difference in meaning making in the learning process. Kim used glue, beads, and paint, to compose her views in forms and symbolic language, “Difference emerges amidst the minutiae and distinct characteristics of life material re-conceptualized in a world of multimodal means.” The tactile quality of her canvases reflect the time that she saw a woman reading a book in Braille as she “watched and wondered—fingers restless to understand.” All of the students articulated that their involvement in the multimodal version of the position paper allowed them to engage in the subject matter in a way that would not have been possible with an exclusive written format. For example, Violet summarized her experience as follows:

Remembering the joy, personal satisfaction and sense of discovery this and other projects brought to me, drew me towards expressing my position on learning differences through a visual rather than written format...through such awareness, new knowledge is formed and one is able to take ownership of his or her point of view and the expression of this through his or her art.

More specifically, Violet deepened her use of symbolism by selecting and using

baskets, beads, and trees made from wire to represent her position on difference. For example, each of the eight branches represented Gardner's (Stanford, 2003) multiple intelligence. A branch with yellow beads expressed spatial intelligence, while a branch with green beads expressed musical intelligence. As Violet took into account the size, color and state of each basket—receptacles of intelligences that each student brings to the learning process—she thought about “the individual's education, environment, and social history in relation to their acquired knowledge.” “The role of the teacher”, Violet concluded, “is to...learn about the student's experiences, passions and weaknesses and build upon them.”

Angela, focusing on her scrapbook, which made elegant use of poetic prose and collage, maintained, “One can always add new knowledge to scrapbooks and in this way scrapbooks are capable of evolving as one's views of the world around him or her transform over time.” For example, at the top of one of her collages, which depicts the backs of five students with labels such as “slow” and “loud mouth,” Angela placed in two tiers the question, “What label are you?” In the following page, which shows the same five students, now with new labels such as “artist” and “gymnast” on their chests, stand under the following statement: “You create the label that defines who you are.” In particular, Angela came to realize that having endless possibilities for the elucidation of one's knowledge influences how one chooses to portray difference.

Aileen remarked on the satisfaction that she derived from creating a sculpture that effectively transmitted her position on the existence of difference in our society. Her sculptural composition, like Angela's collages, also illustrated difference by way of labels fixed to the backs of seven students. More specifically, Aileen arranged the students, each one having unique physical characteristics, such as skin color and height, united and leaning forward around a clear well with the word acceptance spelled across the bottom. Aileen declared that her sculpture “...invites the viewer to obtain new angles or perspectives on the recurring meaning of learning difference in education.” Working with tangible materials to construct a symbolic embodied composition allowed her to better process her thoughts and feelings regarding difference as discussed in our course. In reference to difference and the multimodal opportunities that she encountered, Aileen comments, “People have different skills, strengths, and weaknesses, and people should not solely be judged or graded based on their ability to write a good paper.”

Instructor support emerged as an important factor throughout the five students comments. Drawing from their research on pre-service teachers and arts-based literacy instruction, Dowdy and Campbell (2008) emphasize “When teachers make it clear that they value student creativity the students are then led to understand that their voices are important, regardless of the form in which they choose to present them” (p. 9). Angela remarked, “Providing students

with a choice as to how they feel that they can sufficiently epitomize their voice in their work is vital if a teacher is to ensure that each student can be heard.” Nik echoing Angela’s words claimed, “By allowing me to exercise skills that I don’t use as often, my professor helped me learn much more about the importance of the subject matter we covered, while also helping me discover my own personal experience of ‘difference’.”

Repurposing a Barbie doll by wrapping her in long strips of paper containing commentary on difference, then encasing her in a box with a cellophane cover, Nik presents his position on differences in education. Like Angela and Aileen, he also integrates labels such as, “geek” and “odd” into his expression of difference. According to Clark (2003), “...through our pedagogy, we can help students to understand the constrictions of such labels (on themselves and on their prospective students) and how to challenge these labels” (p. 134).

Like Angela and Aileen, who challenged the labels in their own multimodal compositions, Nik decided to counter the practice of labeling by focusing on the Barbie doll because it encompasses society’s fixation on uniformity and perfection—the antithesis of difference. Nik commented, “...traditional toys too often promote one way of being while ignoring DIFFERENCE.” He discovered that being able to break away from a conventional paper assignment allowed him to incorporate human elements of emotion and creativity, which are at the core of inquiry, investigation, and integration of knowledge. As a result of his experience with multimodal learning in the course, Nik is excited to use his knowledge to “...become a better educator and help students achieve their full potential.”

### *Staying power*

Looking into the classrooms of teachers committed to placing multimodal learning at the center of their instruction, Bustle (2004) encountered Nora, who combined the study of language arts concepts and human rights issues by weaving together literature, poetry, theater, and visual representations into daily explorations. As a result of multimodal work with her students she came to believe,

...while traditional research papers help students collect factual information on their topics of study, artistic or expressive engagements help students make deeply personal, introspective, and emotive connections between new information and themselves—and these engagements allow them to internalize information (Bustle, 2004, p. 421)

Feeling the power of multimodalities for her own learning, Angela emphasized “...there is a greater likeliness that the experience and the learning will be retained when an arts-based route to the implementation of a project has been taken.” Agreeing with Angela, Nik commented,

Most of the time when I submit papers, I will quickly forget about them afterwards. What amazes me most about the experience of submitting a creative project for my



course is the fact that I am still discovering new layers of meaning, despite the fact that I have almost finished my degree.

Reflecting on her multimodal project comprised of symbolic baskets, Violet adds still another piece of information stating, "...a model which represents students themselves, not only provides a vehicle for learning, but also for identity exploration and formation." As VanDeWeghe (2006) asserts, "In the end, what matters most is how students view their classrooms, for it is the culture of those classrooms that have the potential to instill and nurture the skills and the intellectual and affective habits of the mind..." (p. 75).

### *Grading*

Working with existing institutional guidelines regarding the development and implementation of courses, I endeavored to provide students with some level of choice in how they would fulfill the course requirements, particularly the position paper assignment. All five students voiced concern regarding how grades would be assigned to their multimodal works. For example, when Nik heard that he would be able to use alternative media to complete the course requirement, his thoughts ultimately turned to apprehension concerning the mark. Angela, who refers to the ever-present factor of outside judgment and opinion, pointedly remarked, "...the looming shadow of assessment constantly lingers and consumes the objective of the assignment." According to Beghetto (2005), "If students feel pressured by evaluative surveillance, monitoring, and other salient features of assessment, their willingness to express creativity will suffer" (p. 260).

Despite having different levels of comfort with constructing multimodal texts, all five students felt that my repeated assurance helped to assuage their initial apprehension to submit a multimodal assignment. More specifically, as part of our ongoing discussion on difference—a major theme of the course, I addressed any questions, including ones on grading, that the students posed on the use of multimodalities for their position paper assignment. Whether they chose to produce their paper via multimodalities or strictly written form, the requirements remained the same for all students. Differences, however, emerged in the submission phase of their final products. That is, students had the option of arranging for a meeting with me to elaborate on what they had produced as part of the assessment process. Reporting on her research regarding visual representation and assessment, Bustle (2004) maintained that the explanations behind the choices students make in their work is of prime importance in the assessment process. Furthermore, Soep (2005) asserts that assessment itself often functions as an intellectual exercise bearing aesthetic and performative qualities.

### ***Conclusion***

As multimodal learning begins to emerge as an integral part of pedagogical practice, many questions have been asked regarding its viability for classroom use in relation to such aspects as assessment, especially in our times of high stakes testing (Jacobs, 2013; Siegel, 2012), and the need for extra materials to facilitate students' constructions of multimodal expressions (Morawski, 2012). Research, however, indicates "literacies are changing, and so must school literacy curricula" (Siegel, 2012, p. 672). According to Long (2008), "It is no longer sufficient for us to accept the status quo; we need to test our ideas with students in classroom settings and see for ourselves...the addition of voice and choice in what and how...people collaborate, question, and understand the world..." (p. 294). As part of their work on visual literacy, Seglem and Witte (2009) noted, "While many students automatically interpret print texts into nonprint visual images, some students struggle with making the leap from word to images" (p. 217). With feelings and thoughts ranging from uncertainty to inspiration, these five students brought their own unique backgrounds comprised of practical experiences, theoretical perspectives, and the desire to expand their personal and professional range of knowing by way of multiple modes of expressions. Situating themselves in the potentially risky space of the unfamiliar, the five students represented the theoretical and practical aspects of their positions via sculptures, beaded canvases, a layered book papered in memories, and an assemblage of popular culture. The students produced distinct works braided together from relevant experiences, important readings, and specific theoretical footings.

As I consider future inclusions of the position paper as part of the requirements for my graduate course on learning differences in education, the courageous actions and insightful response of Angela, Violet, Kim, Nik, and Aileen, all of whom accepted my invitation to embrace possibilities of the unfamiliar and engage in multimodalities, will play an integral role. First, future implementations of the position paper with a multimodal option will incorporate periodic in-class, and optional out-of-class sessions, where students can work together and apart as they reflect on and revise their various drafts. Assessment would also occur during those times, allowing students to receive comments and recommendations from both peers and the course instructor. In light of the important role that the five students placed on personal connection, special emphasis would be given to fostering this element in their multimodal expressions via such means as placed-based exercises (Bruce, 2011; Jacobs, 2011) and reflective journals (Pantaleo, 1995; Stone, 1998). To provide still another way for students to experience the application of multimodalities, relevant exercises already being used and previously mentioned, such as body biography and graffiti walls, would continue. Collaborative learning opportunities such as the ones previously mentioned, according to Jewett (2010), offer more complex ways of knowing to students as they are introduced to a diversity of perspectives and practices—a necessary ingredient for expanding modes of expression in student learning.

In addition to the benefits that my future students will encounter from the findings of our action research study, Violet, Kim, Nik, Angela and Aileen will move forth into their own lives with newfound knowledge on both differences in education and multimodal learning. Siegel (1995) asserts that the use of multimodalities encourages thinking that creates new connections and meanings—critical components of the learning process. By participating in the application of multimodal learning for their position paper assignment, the five students concurred that the use of additional means of expressions and representations encouraged them to draw on various elements of personal resources, such as emotion and imagination, to reconsider difference as a multidimensional and fluid concept. Angela effectively encapsulates the essence of their individual and collective voices when she exclaims, “...to generate something unlike anyone’s else’s creation is an empowering experience that connects our internal working material with the promising differences of external life.”

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Cynthia Morawski, Professor in the Faculty of Education, University of Ottawa, received her Doctorate from Columbia University Teachers College in teaching and curriculum with a specialization in reading and language arts. Her research interests include teaching narratives, adolescent literacies, bibliotherapy, and arts-based/-informed learning, including poetics of memory work. She teaches both graduate and undergraduate courses in literacy, learning differences, the arts, and children's and young adult literature. In addition to her university teaching, she has extensive teaching experience at the elementary and secondary levels in both regular and special needs classrooms in Canada as well as in the United States.

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Aileen Nutt, a registered nurse working at the Children's Hospital of Eastern Ontario, pursued a Masters of Education degree with the view to becoming a nurse educator. She maintains her avid interest in arts and crafts.

Following a B.A. in Psychology and a Masters of Education (Counselling), Nik Pasic began a teaching career in Ottawa, Ontario. He is currently teaching Junior Kindergarten, where he hopes to help nurture creativity and personal expression in his students, everyday! Nik's favourite creative outlet is gardening, though he does enjoy manipulating playdough and building with blocks (when working with students, of course).

After receiving her B.Ed. degree, Angela Rogers became an adult educator. Wanting to further build her theoretical background and enhance her practical application in education, she completed a Masters of Education from the University of Ottawa. She continues to pursue her creative interests.

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