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An Encounter with Fleeting Moments through Transitional Space

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Abstract

This paper is based on a phenomenologically oriented exploratory case study. It focuses on Bea, one of the many fascinating individuals the author met at a unique educational site who had an invaluable impact not only on the refinement of the initial guiding question of inquiry, but also on the author as an educator and educational researcher. Through the notion of transitional space in particular, as well as the interpretation and analysis of Bea's short film and the interview, the author invites the interested readers to contemplate on our own assumptions about youth as well as those we teach, what constitutes a 'finished' product, and what we consider to be the site and practices of education.

The Setting

> *It's the camp. It's the island. It's the not going anywhere else. I mean, I think anything would work well, very well, in this environment, whatever you're trying to teach, whether it be math or French or science or . . . it wouldn't matter. You'd get people that are interested all together, and . . . they feed off of each other. And . . . the bell never goes, and that really helps.* (George Harris, 2008)

Figure 1. One of the main common areas. Photographed by the author.

The place that George Harris describes is the Gulf Islands Television and Film School (GIFTS) located off the coast of British Columbia, Canada on an island called Galiano Island, which he founded in 1995.[1] It is a site similar to that of an artist-in-residence setting for emerging and professional artists who seek to immerse themselves in creative engagement away from their daily obligations and familiar surroundings.

The bell does go off three times a day at GIFTS - at breakfast, lunch, and dinner - but the bell that George is implying, which signals the beginning of class hour, end of class hour, or time to go home that bounds the students and teachers with everyday routine, tasks, and expectations, does not exist. Moreover, the bell does not simply function as a signal to gather or disperse as it would at schools. Instead, it provides time and space for everyone at the site

[1] More information can be found on GIFTS' website – www.giftsfilms.com - and our website - http://citizensoftomorrow.research.educ.ubc.ca. There are also articles written on various aspects of this research project by the team: Castro & Grauer, 2010; Lin, Castro, Sinner, & Grauer, 2011; Lin, Grauer, & Castro, 2011; Grauer, Castro, & Lin, 2012; Ryoo, Lin, & Grauer, 2014.

to connect and share their thoughts over food. This, in fact, is perhaps one of the most unique qualities this site has to offer - being able surround oneself with people who share similar interests and are open to building new relationships at a place where one has "a chance to perform oneself anew" (Castro & Grauer, 2010, p. 18).

Throughout my time at GIFTS in the summer of 2013, I spent all of my waking hours with: 26 students[2] between the ages of 12 and 19, four interns between the ages of 15 and 19 in the first week and two in the second week, three mentors, Tim, the cook who rang the bell three times a day, George, his wife, and their teen-aged daughter.[3] Most of us, the temporary residents, slept in tents or one of the ten dorm rooms which one of the mentors described as having a smell of years' worth of teenage boys which then prompted him to pitch his own tent right behind the dorm building in the woods. Out of the 26 students, six students were in a two-week long Directors Program through which they got to write and direct each of their own script, casted their actors and actresses via a semi-formal auditioning process, and worked as each other's film crew while working on their own film.[4] Another group of eight students were enrolled in a two-week long Acting on Camera Program through which they not only took acting classes, but also worked on each of their own monologues and auditioned for and played various roles in more than a dozen films. The rest of them were in a one-week long Intensive Dramatic Production Program through which inexperienced students worked in small groups to produce a film with more support from the interns.

It was a common sight to see students taking initiatives and being engaged in multiple forms of activities in every corner of the campsite – whether it may be discussing the issues they had encountered the day before, planning what they will do for the day, finding ways to be resourceful with props, or talking about their past experiences of acting in or making a film – over breakfast in their pajamas, while waiting in line to take a shower, or while watching movies into the late night.[5] The interns, who are high school students themselves and former students at GIFTS, were involved in every activity that went on at GIFTS – from giving

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[2] The total number changed after the first week when the first group of one-week long program students left and another group of twelve students enrolled in the same program arrived.

[3] GIFTS was also going through a major historical moment during my time there – a passing of ownership from George to a former GIFTS student from over a decade ago, Evan Allen armed with extensive working experience in the film industry, and his mother, Barbara Allen.

[4] On the second day, feeling a bit overwhelmed, one of these students decided to join the one-week long program instead, so the number became five.

[5] At the end of each week, GIFTS holds a film-screening for the students' family members and friends who arrive in the morning to visit the site and attend the event. Even though they are aware that their films can be viewed online later on via YouTube or via a copy of DVD that has everyone's work, this day, this event, becomes a driving motivation for them to work through days and nights. Until the very last minute prior to the start of the film screening, the intensity could be felt as the students scramble to finish editing their films.

technical workshops to helping Tim prepare meals and driving students to off-site shooting locations around the island. Spending time with the interns in a group as well as one on one setting, it was apparent to me that being an intern for them was an opportunity to invest themselves in an environment where they can build their professional and social network, gain more knowledge about the industry, and engage in a creative and collaborative process by working on their own films during their off times. Needless to say, these offerings in turn instilled a sense of care toward this place because of what it has offered and could offer for them and for others. Last but not least, three mentors facilitated each program respectively: Reem, a human rights activist and independent filmmaker, Marek, a film and theater actor, and Evan, a film industry veteran, a former GIFTS student, and now one of the new owners of GIFTS. While offering their own expertise as experienced veterans in their own respective field with vast life experiences to share, what I observed was mentors offering mentorship that took a form of nudging or a form of an invitation. As an educator and educational researcher to be present in this environment occupied by people with desire to offer a part of themselves to something, someone, and/or some place was inspiring and refreshing to say the least.

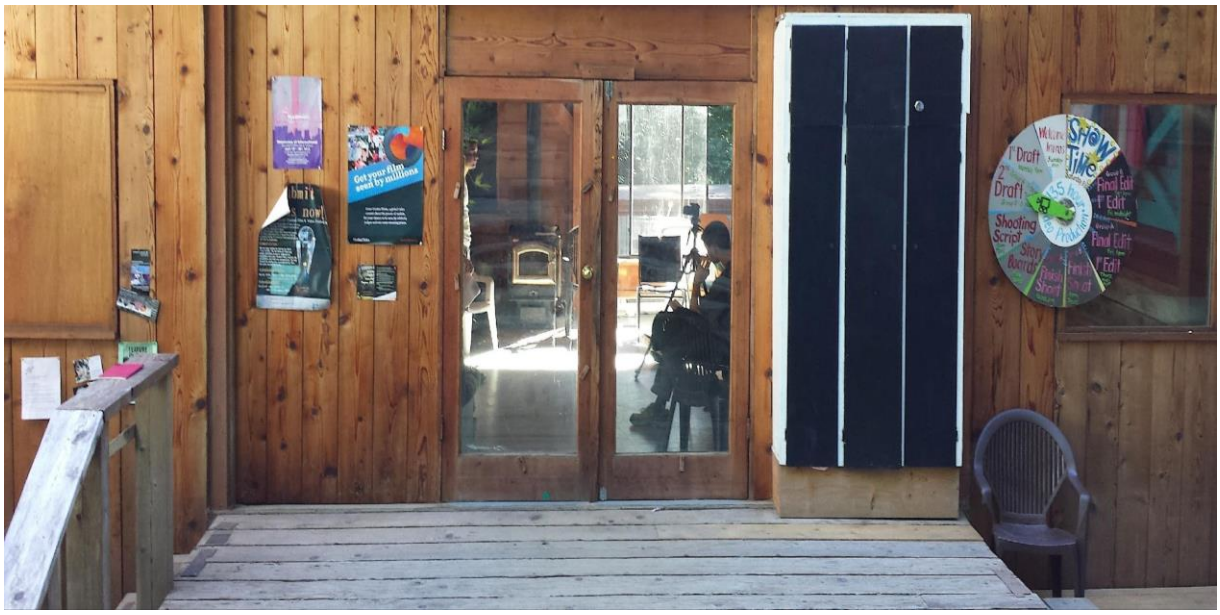

Figure 2. An audition in process. Photographed by the author.

I had initially embarked on this study with the following main guiding question of inquiry: 'how do young people's creative practice and digital production influence their conceptualization, negotiation, and participation around issues of identity, culture, and wellbeing?' However, a choice of what was to be studied shifted as I was guided by the research process (Stake, 1995; VanWynsberghe & Khan, 2007). It became a phenomenologically oriented study embracing multiple subjective realities as I was immersed in the setting and interacted constantly with all who were there in an attempt to understand

and study individual events that occurred. The unit of analysis I had at the onset evolved as I engaged in data collection, interpretation and analysis, and consequently, I decided to acquaint myself with a particular case with greater depth (Merriam, 1998; Stake, 1995).

Robert E. Stake, who is often referred to as an interpretivist, denoted in *The Art of Case Study Research* how case study researchers consciously or unconsciously take up different roles, such as teacher, evaluator, consultant, storyteller, or artist, varying emphasis as they do so (Stake, 1995; Yazan, 2015). I experienced that constant shift as one of the many co-habitants eating the same meal and spending the entire duration of the program together. Stake (1995) states, "We draw from understanding deep within us, understandings whose derivation may be some hidden mix of personal experience, scholarship, assertions of other researchers" (p. 12). He believed how a case study research is conducted and how assertions are made largely depend on who we are and how we have come to be and will be through, for instance, our lived experiences and beliefs. Reflecting on the process of collecting and analyzing multiple methods of data (including daily field notes, audio and/or videotaped semi-structured and in-depth interviews, visual and written documentations of the various points of the programs, and students' works, such as their storyboards, scripts, and films), I further acknowledge that my lived experiences, expectations, interests, and assumptions all affected how I conducted the study, how I gathered, interpreted, and analyzed data, and even perhaps how I am writing this paper.

This paper, as such, ended up focusing on one of the students, Bea, a 15-year-old girl at the time of study who had an invaluable impact not only on the refinement of my initial guiding question of inquiry, but also on me as an educator and educational researcher. In the next section, I will first briefly discuss about her film as an entry into the section that follows. I will then juxtapose it against what was revealed and experienced during the interview which took place before the film was completed.

Third Nature

Bea wrote a script for her short film, *Third Nature* (2013), in the first few days of the program, but constantly altered and refined it as her group took turns casting their actors, staging their sites, being each other's film crew, and shooting each of their own film. Her film is based on her own life story which features a 17-year-old male high school student, Alex. The conflicts he experiences at home and at school in regards to academic studies take up the most part of the film followed by what appears to be a rushed happy ending where he receives an acceptance letter from a prestigious university.

The film depicts her perception of the current education system where there seems to be a lack

of room for individuality to flourish and where students often feel powerless in the midst of unfairness and inequality. This underlying message of the film is conveyed through a long soliloquy by Alex in the second to last scene. This arguably one of the most important scenes of the film, however, faced technical challenges, which Bea was unable to resolve due to time constraints. It sounds like an angry mumbling sound and loses its intended impact due to the low volume of the voiceover against the background music. While the audience gets suddenly lured into this scene at the onset due to an assemblage of non-sequential visual images with a background music that contributes in creating serious ambience, the message gets lost in the mix.

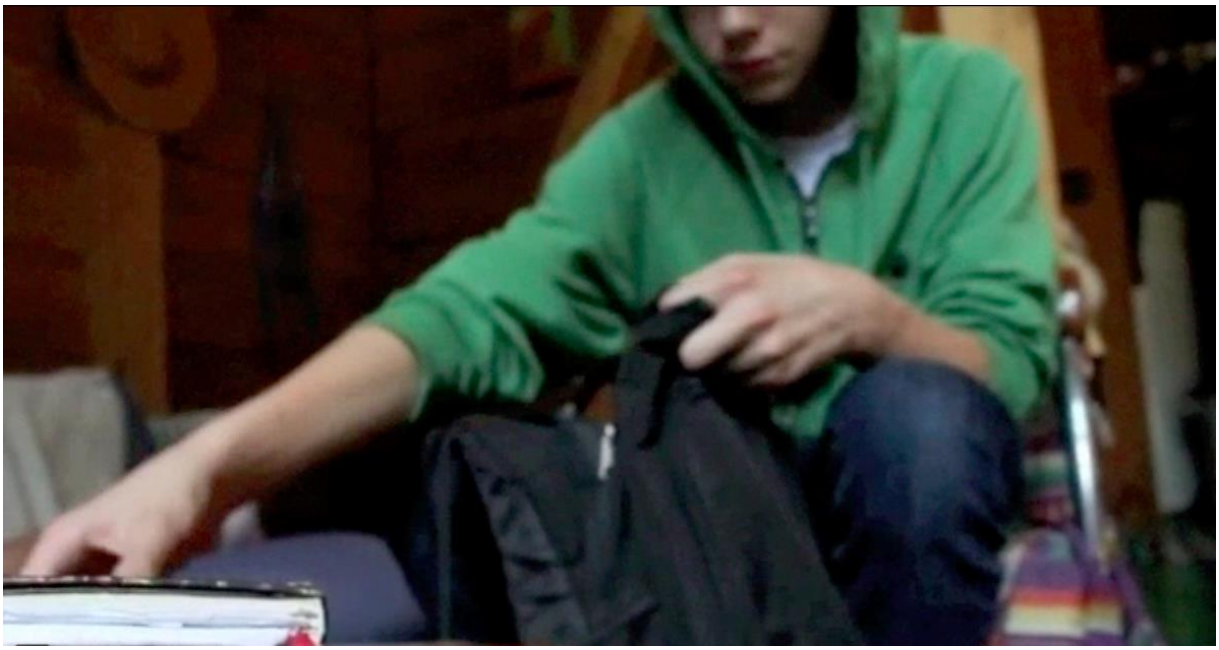

Figure 3. A video still from *Third Nature*

Although she also implicitly shares her fear in this soliloquy, ending up doing a job that she despises after years of battling against getting good grades amongst people who seem to get by dishonorably, she is not merely displaying animosity toward schooling by listing its flaws. Rather, she values what education, or more precisely, *educational experience* can be, believes one's success is dependent on what one learns, and hopes current situation to be otherwise. More importantly, she simultaneously responds to and further raises the problematic aspects of schooling via a series of questions, as well as suggesting, for instance, how the measure of success should be about how open-minded one is with good attitude. What *may* have motivated her to write the script and create this film, then, is her hope that a school becomes a place where students may freely pursue one's interest, be accepted for who they are, and on their own terms come to understand how they may contribute to this world.

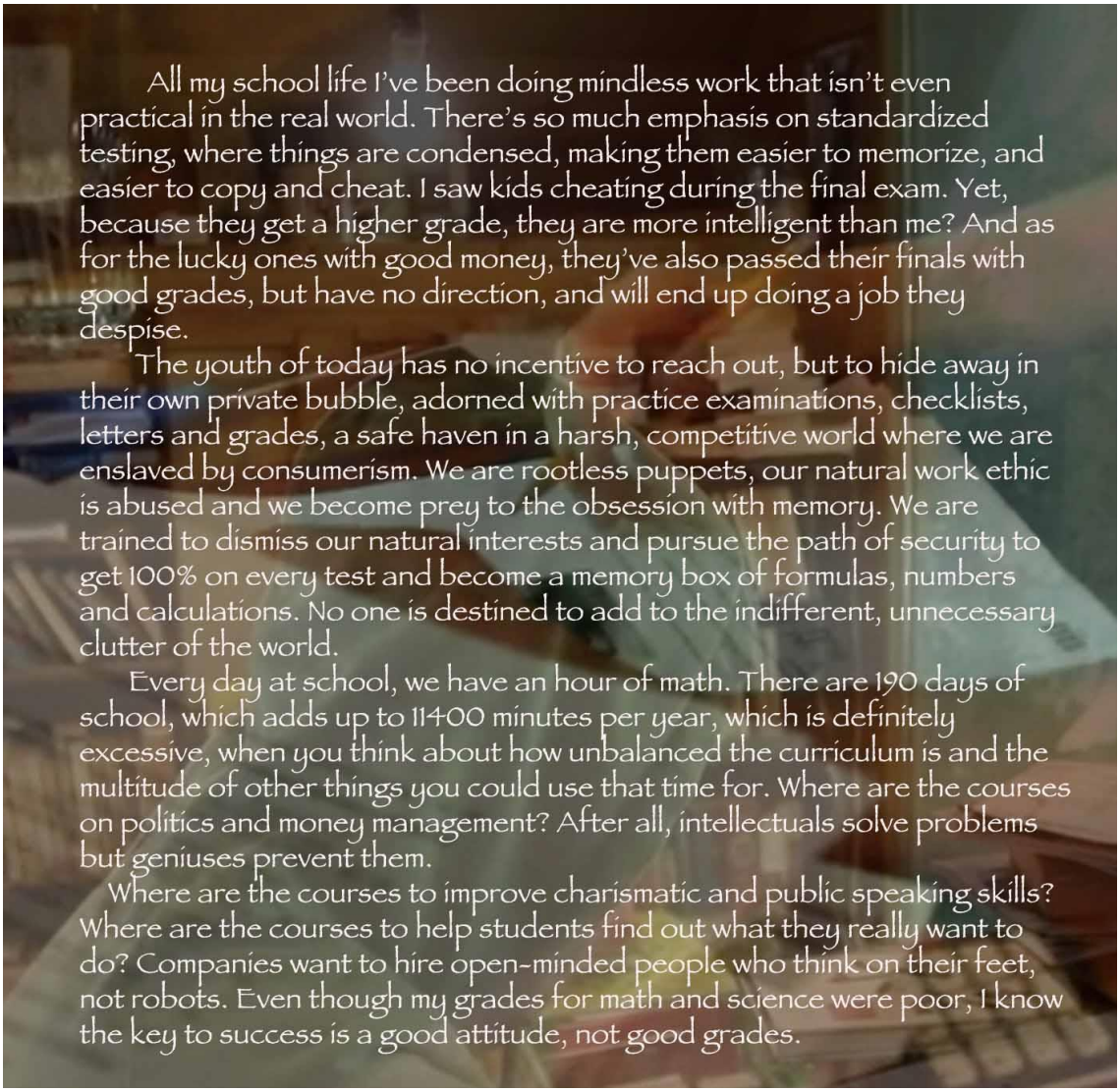

Figure 4. Author's rendering of a scene from *Third Nature* by layering clips and the script used in the scene.

At a first glance, the storyline appeared to be a typical teenaged boy going through a not so unusual problem: showing dislike toward the current education system, the ways in which science and math are given more importance than the arts, and feeling victimized and oppressed by authoritative figures around him. However, as I spent more time with her film, her revised scripts, my field notes, and our interviews, the simplicity of the storyline became more intricately complicated. New questions arose: *what if we view the film as a temporal, momentary insight into Bea's beliefs and thoughts instead of equating it to a product that shows her concrete beliefs and thoughts? What if, for a moment, we suspend that judgment based on a finished product and opened our perceptions to the affects and questions that emerge? What would happen if we focus on behind the process or the often unnoticed, overlooked, abandoned, or unfinished moments?* When I began to think with these questions,

her film no longer was a representation of what she believes in or who she is. Instead, it became a still-in-process or, as Elizabeth Ellsworth (2005) puts it, "always in the making" (p. 1). In other words, rather than evaluating or assessing the film which would occur when a film is considered "finished" or as a final product, for instance, focusing on the level of filmmaking proficiency, this different way of perceiving allowed me to become more attentive to nuances and her intentions, and I became more intrigued with what led her to write this script.

A Fleeting Encounter

In the midst of hustle and bustle from early in the morning until late into the night, one of those hard to find opportunities to have one-on-one interviews came toward the end of the first week with Bea as her group decided to take a short break before heading out to shoot a scene off the camp site. Somehow I managed to secure an empty common area during the busiest time of the day to where I invited Bea to sit near the well-lit window. She sat down with a can of cold soda, and I sat across from her. Almost throughout the entire interview, I noticed that she habitually put her five fingernails pressed against the other five, occasionally making sounds with them by brushing four fingernails against the other four repeatedly, which made her seem timid and insecure. I also noticed that she made almost no eye contact with me nor gazed into the camera. If she did so, it was for brief moments. As if to counteract my conditioned reading of such body languages, her facial expression seemed to say otherwise as she earnestly and confidently responded to every question I asked.

Figure 5. A still image from the interview.

One of the first questions I asked was if she has a message to share through her film, she responded:

> *. . . the voice that comes from the main character will speak up for a lot of the children . . . I know a lot of the people at GIFTS . . . they are very open-minded and very independent because they have some really mature ideas. And some of the people said there are some of the pieces of dialogues in my script reminded them of the arguments they had had with their parents. And yeah, it's almost like being regurgitated into my script.*

She did not immediately explain what the message was, but what was evident was that this film was as much for her as for others. As well, she had positioned herself in a community of open-minded, independent people with mature ideas who can feel the empathy with and for

her. It was unclear at that point, however, who she was referring to as "children", especially when the main character in her film is a 17-year-old high school senior. I quickly jot down this word that caught my attention on my notepad hoping that I could return to it later.

When she was asked to whom she wants to tell or show her story and why to that particular audience, she responded:

> *I kind of wish my teachers would see it because it's a bit about things that I have struggled with in education, and learning, and thinking about like what's the right way to go about it. Should I always take advice? Should I always take help? Should I be more of an independent worker? . . . It would be cool if my teachers would see it, especially the ones I don't like . . . I think some teachers definitely [think of me as] nobody with no direction in my life and they don't really know what I want to do. They just think I suck at a particular subject.*

As she shared how the inspiration for her story is drawn from her own personal experience, she appeared to have been feeling confined by the labels she felt her teachers have placed on her, and perhaps by the education system that contributes to the proliferation of labeling based on academic achievement. While listening to her reflecting on those moments, I could not help but feel this silent volcanic eruption within me as I began to have flashbacks of my own lived experiences. I wondered: how many times have I, as a student and even now, wished that I could get the "right" words out at the "right" time? As a teacher, have I ever unintentionally miscommunicated certain gestures through absence and/or presence of a certain body language or words? How often have I felt helpless at times about not being able to reach out to all those that walked through my classroom door? And so on.

Toward the end of our interview, she responded without any hesitance, "Yeah, probably," to the question, "Do you think you will live your life back home a little differently because of the experience you've gained here?" Sensing that she has more to say, I probed her further to elaborate her response, and she said,

> *I've realized that my, like this rage I have against like being really stubborn about learning like math and science and retrying with that . . . I've learned, it's not such a strong argument. And what really bothered me is, it goes deeper than that. It's not just I don't like it. I learned a lot about myself and . . . yeah, not just that math and science are lame.*

She continued on but appeared as though she was struggling to find words to describe what she was thinking and experiencing as if new thoughts were fighting against what once were

more concrete thoughts. Her response was somewhat vague in that she did not actually talk about how she would live her life differently. It was also possible that it had something to do with the nature of question, which required her to predict or imagine something that she has yet to experience – her future-self. In other words, when she was asked to imagine her immediate future identity in relation to her film as well as the experience of making it, she hesitated unlike how she responded to the previous questions. Uncertain of which direction to take at that moment, I, too, was hesitant whether to probe further or not. Multiple questions went through my head, but I decided to simply ask, "what is it that you learned about yourself?" Her response was rather an unexpected surprise.

> *I think it was because when I was younger, I used to be like one of those really over-productive kids. And when I was going through my stuff at home, when I was cleaning my room, I found four books which I made, and each had like100 pages. And they were – they had all these like pieces of illustrations and like pieces of poetry that I used to work on them every single day . . . So because I had that gift when I was younger, I was able to embrace it, and people would always see me as like this child prodigy. And then I started to lose that when I was older, because I had to focus on other things. So I wasn't really improving. Everyone else was just catching up with me . . . I've lost like creative spots that I used to have, just a little bit, and I still want to think I do have that.*

In front of me was a girl at 15, talking about her child-self who she considers to be more than who she is today. She was reminiscing about a young girl who had a great interest in art and poetry, was artistically talented and enthusiastically created those books on her own, and received praises from others. She now realized that the drive and motivation she used to have had dissipated, and her present-self was no longer getting the praises. What was most stirring, for me, was that despite feeling ignored by her teachers, she believed she still embodies her younger-self, or at least that it is possible to re-embody it again – her old identity as a child prodigy through which she felt pride and had heightened secure sense of who she was and what she was capable of.

Just as we were about to wrap up our interview, I was reminded of a word that caught my attention earlier "children", which prompted me to ask, "towards the beginning of our interview process, you mentioned that you want to speak for the children. Do you see yourself as one of them, or do you see yourself as someone who has grown out of it?" She stopped grazing her four fingernails against the other four back and forth and asked, "Grown out of what?" To which I responded, "being a child I suppose." A few seconds later, she responded:

> *Children . . . I still feel like a child. I turned 15 like a couple of months ago, but I*

> *still feel 14 because . . . I used to be like a lot talented when I was younger, so when I was 12, and, I did like a really good drawing, and people were like, "Wow, you are only 12." But when you are 15, your standards are raised, and more is expected of you. So yeah, I want to think that I am younger, but I am not. I just have to raise the bar.*

Then I saw:

> *[t]he look on a child's face as she experience[d] learning in this sense – as the sensing of new and previously unthought or unfelt senses of self, others, and the world in their process of emergence . . . It is the look of someone who is in the process of losing something outside herself and her own ways of thinking, she is giving up thoughts she previously held as known, and as a consequence she is parting with a bit of her known self. The look of the learning self that concerns me here gives form to the sensation simultaneously being with oneself and being in relation to things, people, or ideas outside oneself. (Ellsworth, 2005, p. 16)*

Transitional Space

One may argue, Bea created her own cultural production to interpret and respond to her position which enabled a sense of agency (e.g. Kral, 2011; Rogers, Winters, LaMonde, & Perry, 2010). As sites for identity construction, multimodal spaces do indeed hold potentials to provide youth with opportunities to perform, define, and explore their identities through engaging in participatory cultures as producers of new media (e.g. Halverson, 2010; Jenkins, Purushotma, Clinton, Weigel, & Robinson, 2007; Willett, Burn, & Buckingham, 2005). This paper, however, sought to create an alternative space to invite fellow educators and scholars to ponder upon our own educative spaces and educational practices, and, to (re)imagine curricular and pedagogical possibilities we have yet to fully embrace and actualize by dwelling with the notion of 'transitional space'.

The process of telling a story through making an expressive form of art, in this case film, offered her a mode and an occasion to give recognition to her old-self while at the same time discovering what could be her new-self: someone who is still creative, who needs to become more responsible for her own learning, and who has something to offer to others. Not all who tell their story through the medium of film will go through such an experience, but the potential to do so exists. This denotes the critical cultural function of the art and its capacity to effect a movement from invisibility to visibility, reassembling subjectivity through affect (Hickey-Moody, 2013). More significantly, for Bea, immersing herself in this unique setting allowed her to encounter a transitional space through which she experienced something that cannot be pre-planned or expected by the mentors. Every day she spent her time working as a

part of a community amongst people who share similar passion and interest and with whom she could share her concerns with as well as speak of and for them. The script, for example, which she revised over and over again, triggered her to become reminiscent of the little girl who used to be self-motivated and received a lot of compliments for her artistic talent. This perhaps is what Grossberg (1997, p. 387) referred to as "a pedagogy of possibilities . . . a pedagogy that aims to not to predefine its outcome . . . but to empower its students to begin to reconstruct their world in new ways, and to rearticulate their future" (cited in Hickey-Moody, 2013, p. 121).

As such, the most significant underpinning conceptual notions for this study is D. W. Winnicott's (1971) notion of transitional space, which denotes a difficult transition "from reacting to the outside world in habitual ways" (Ellsworth, 2005, p. 30) to a state of "a surprising moment of spontaneous play, creativity, and imaginative putting to use" (Ellsworth, 2005, p. 61). In her book, *Places of learning: Media, architecture, pedagogy,* Ellsworth (2005) invites readers "to think relationally" (p. 4) and consider pedagogy as a nonlinguistic, embodied experience where knowledge is constantly "in the making" and not "a thing made" (p. 1). In other words, for Ellsworth (2005), the notion of transitional space "invites us to [re]imagine pedagogy as addressing the learning self as an emergence – as a self and an intelligence that is always in the making" (p. 57). Her offering, then, not only challenges common conceptions around teaching and learning, but also our own understanding of ourselves as well as those we encounter. Pedagogy in the making, I would emphasize, is something that is more felt and embodied than something that can be captured and re-created. Perhaps it is due to the element of surprise and unpredictability when one occupies such a space ever so momentarily. Ellsworth (2005) writes:

> *[W]hen we are in transitional space – we are neither ourselves as we have come to know them nor are we our others. We are in transition. We are traversing the boundaries between self and other and reconfiguring those boundaries and the meanings we give them. We are entertaining strangeness and playing in difference. We are crossing that important internal boundary that is the line between the person we have been but no longer are and the person we will become. (pp. 61–62)*

There is no doubt that I was witnessing, and possibly co-experiencing, that transitional space as Bea occupied and experienced it, which I, as an educator over the course of my teaching career, have learned to treasure and look forward to such rare moments.

Drawing on works of Gilles Deleuze, Anna Hickey-Moody (2013) raises "the cultural significance of the kinds of learning that [can] occur in and through arts" in her book, *Youth,*

arts, and education: Reassembling subjectivity through affect (n.p.). Hickey-Moody (2013) denotes, "through providing physical places to inhabit, through facilitating experiences of being and making, and through generating public images of youth" (p. 131), art made by youth (as well as public art made for youth) may offer an "instance of culture as affective pedagogy" (p. 122). Furthermore, according to de Castell and Jenson (2006), "[w]hen youth are engaged as knowledgeable, thoughtful, and above all, legitimate social actors with a contribution to make to their own and their peers' well-being, . . . creativity, resourcefulness and similar indications of considerable intelligence, ability, and understanding come into view" (pp. 238-239). I believe when we begin to challenge our own assumptions, such as by positioning youth as valuable contributors rather than subjects to be molded and assessed, we may then be able to imagine curricular and pedagogical possibilities and begin to understand what it means to consider "educational experience as lived" (Pinar, 2015).

Lingering Thoughts

The final products are not fully equivalent to the "voice" of the youth filmmaker. Instead, it offers a partial representation of the youth filmmaker's moment in time because the final product never equates to who s/he is when it is "finished"; it should be considered as a partial or temporal being of the youth for s/he goes through a constant process of becoming (Ellsworth, 2005). Further, while the experience of making a film can be transformative, the film itself does not necessarily show or capture this process as the interview with Bea illustrates. This suggests that curricula involving multimodal production around issues of identity, social justice, wellbeing, and so forth should be accompanied by reflective and reflexive practices in order to take advantage of what such curricula may offer.

One of the most significant junctures of this study was indeed data analysis through which the focus of the study was re-shaped and became more refined. Various other approaches could have been taken to write this paper, such as an in-depth comparative analysis of films created around the same time or an integration of other students' accounts into the writing. However, this paper ended up focusing on the story of Bea, because through my encounter with her, it opened up something I had not anticipated – an experience of being in transition and in motion toward previously unknown ways of thinking and being in the world (Ellsworth, 2005). In the footage of that interview, for example, I was constantly but unintentionally, making an audible sound of token of acknowledgment that seem to indicate that I was in agreement with her, or at least, deeply engrossed in what she had to say. And, no matter how many times I went through the research data, particularly that of Bea, there was an "indescribable sensation" (de Bolla, 2001) that ran through the core of my body – a sensation that reminds me why I decided to walk this path of being an educator and a scholar in the field of education and devote my life to make even a smallest contribution to what we call education. It moved me to consider "unsuspected alternatives, of roads not taken, of unwritten

letters to the world . . . a new kind of authenticity, perhaps the return of a lost spontaneity – an ability to retrieve meaning funded over time" (Greene, 2007, n. p.). She reminded me once again that there is more to every person than what we can perceive; that all of us are on a life-long journey of understanding and discovering who we are; that we are always residing in the state of "being and becoming" (Aoki, 1979/2005) endlessly transitioning "from the person one has been to the person that one has yet to become" (Ellsworth, 2005, p. 17).

I felt thankful that a camera and a voice recorder were capturing at least a glimpse of what went on that afternoon in that room for me to revisit later because they allowed me to re-live that moment in ways that my notes would not have allowed me to (Voithofer, 2005). As well, they prevented me from preoccupying myself with anxiously jotting notes down as she spoke, which could have been a distraction that may have taken the conversation elsewhere. Most importantly, her own words and phrasing would have gotten lost as I unintentionally altered them, and thereby increasing the risk of misrepresenting what she was trying to convey.

When I began writing this paper, I set out to make an effort to invite interested readers to vicariously experience and raise questions with me (Stake, 1995). As I write this last paragraph, I am hoping that my attempt has offered a space to imagine and ponder upon some more questions together. This paper also has been my attempt to describe those "fleeting moments" that Ellsworth refers to as "when [one] attempt[s] to articulate the sensations out of which learning and understanding . . . emerge" (2005, p. 17). When we are lucky enough to encounter such moments as educators and researchers, I believe, those moments will reinvigorate our hope and faith in working toward what-is-yet-possible.

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