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Multimodal adult learning through arts-based organisations

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Funded by the Social Sciences and Research Council of Canada (SSHRC) grant, this national study examines arts-based adult education organizations involved in dance, music, drama, and visual arts with a philosophical perspective aligned with a multiliteracies theoretical framework. Multiliteracies considers how cultural and linguistic diversity must be fostered to encourage adults to thrive in all learning environments and recognizes that multimodality provides an expanded way to engage in literacy practices. Utilizing Carey Jewitt's four theoretical tenets to characterize multimodality serves to structure the analytical framework for the findings and discussion of this paper. Multiple case studies and constructivist grounded theory were used for the methodology. Some of the sites discussed in this paper include an art gallery; an immigration museum; and a chamber music organization that offers interactive performances. Participants included adult educators and learners who had options around face-

to-face interviews; observations; document analysis of lesson plans or exemplars; or secondary data analysis of original film footage shot in these spaces. This research has found that arts-based approaches can infuse the work of adult educators to engage adult learners in inclusive pedagogy and active citizenship.

Keywords: *adult education, arts-based learning, multiliteracies, multimodality, inclusion and citizenship, community-based learning*

Hearing the silence of the world, the failure of the world to announce meaning, we tell stories.

Robert Kroetsch, 1989, p. 64

Introduction

Stories help us to make sense of the world. Our narratives can come from many different sources and are found in a broad range of artistic forms that can fuel the imaginative responses of adult learners to the broader world. Funded by a Social Sciences and Research Council of Canada (SSHRC) grant, this national study included multiple case studies of arts-based adult education organisations involved in dance, music, drama, and visual arts with a philosophical perspective aligned with a multiliteracies theoretical framework. Multiliteracies consider how cultural and linguistic diversity must be fostered to encourage adults to thrive in all learning environments and recognize that multimodality provides an expanded way to engage in creative literacy practices.

The paper begins with an assessment of the value of using arts-based learning in adult education contexts to foster literacy, citizenship, and inclusion, provides a short discussion of the theoretical framework, and then overviews the research study. Constructivist grounded theory was used for the methodology. The findings and discussion section has been structured using Carey Jewitt's (2017) four theoretical tenets to characterize multimodality. This research study represents empirical findings from two provinces within the Canadian context. The insights

are transferable to other global contexts in posing questions about how to build capacities for democratic and inclusive approaches to learning literacy.

Literature review

Arts-based approaches can delve into challenging issues such as inequities or discrimination to foster learning and to create opportunities for adult learning within civil society. Butterwick and Selman (2020) argue that participatory arts may be used "as a way of contributing to community ownership, inclusive critical analysis, coalition, and resilience" (p. 35). Similarly, Brann-Barrett's (2011) work with young adults using photo narratives explores issues of identity and citizenship engagement in poorer, rural communities.

Joe Norris (2011) builds on a First Nations circle metaphor to explore the value of the arts in education, noting that there are benefits in having students explore different forms in art, even though they often lack skill and expertise in areas such as writing poetry or performing in live theatre. He states that "we must be pedagogically patient as we witness our students experimenting with form as they create meaning for themselves and others. Through exposure, they are moving towards the arts as dynamic forms of expression" (p. 5). Gaining the ability to articulate or investigate different meaning perspectives through various forms in the arts is valuable learning.

Arts-based learning provides a strong foundation for adult educators and learners to deepen their engagement with literacy and think more broadly about what multimodality might look like through a creative lens. In local communities, arts-based learning provides opportunities to explore complex issues during this time of ecological, economic, social, and cultural change. This type of learning can tap into adults' imaginations in ways that more straightforward, traditional teaching may not achieve. Butterwick and Roy (2018) note that "artistic and creative expression, thoughtfully carried out, can enliven adult learning, promote risk taking and empathy for others, and move toward relations of solidarity (p. 3). Our usual ways of thinking can be disrupted when engaging in art that invites us to think and feel about the world in ways we have perhaps previously not considered. In neoliberal times, which privilege economic growth and advantage certain social and historical

groups who benefit from the status quo, artistic engagement provides a way to articulate alternative perspectives.

Literacy, the ability to communicate effectively, can be learned through artistic approaches to explore the cultural mores, social relations, and personal emotions of adults. As Lankshear (2011) writes, adult educators of literacy are "acutely aware of the power of literacy teaching as a shaper of consciousness" (p. 23). Multiliteracies is like New Literacy Studies in defining literacies from a sociocultural perspective that recognizes language as socially situated and understands discourses are forms of power. Where multiliteracies might enrich our thinking around lifelong learning is in its consideration for how multimodality provides a range of opportunities to foster learning. Arts-based approaches can suffuse the work of adult educators to move adult learning beyond didactic pedagogies (Clover, 2018; Holloway & Qaisi, 2022; Jarvis & Gouthro, 2015).

Theoretical framework

We draw upon multiliteracies to deepen our analysis of ways in which community arts-based learning contributes to broadening adult learners' ability to drive positive change. As we (Gouthro & Holloway, 2015) have argued elsewhere, "as leaders themselves, educators need to think theoretically about the rationalization for why it is important for them to choose curriculum material that deeply engages in larger social issues, such as feminism, power, identity, and citizenship" (p. 253). Multiliteracies (New London Group, 1996) are similar in their premises to New Literacy Studies (Tett et al., 2012); the latter is better known in the fields of adult education/lifelong learning. Both theories contend that language is always a socially situated, fluid practice informed by larger cultural and political systems that influence how literacy is used in communities as well as shaped through policies. Street (2003) observes that the "original inspiration" for New Literacy Studies was to explore "what literacy events and practices mean to users in different cultural and social contexts" (p 87).

Multiliteracies offer a distinct emphasis on multimodality, which provides further tools to analyse expanded forms of literacy. Multimodality refers to the combination of modes to allow for more powerful ways to communicate. Cope and Kalantzis (2000) argue that

there is an "increasing multiplicity and integration of significant modes of meaning making, where the textual is also related to the visual, the audio, the spatial, the behavioural, and so on" (p. 5). For instance, multimodality is evident when an adult learner creates a video using facial expressions and movement (gestural mode) combined with costumes (tactile and visual modes) as well as music (audio mode) to express themselves. Different kinds of modality are often used in arts-based approaches in adult education, that may incorporate, for instance, elements of dance, painting, music, or poetry. Cope and Kalantzis (2000) claim that "to find our way around this emerging world of meaning requires a new, multimodal literacy" (p. 6). Multiliteracies perspectives also value cultural and linguistic diversity and affirm learners' identities by using an assets-based approach. Cope and Kalantzis (2020) view agency "as always there, in and through meanings made in text, image, space, object, body, sounds, and speech" (p. 174). Agency and identity can be manifested through multimodal meaning-making. Multiliteracies help provide a rationale for the benefits of using arts-based approaches in a range of different adult learning contexts.

Multiliteracies, like critical literacy, explore the role of personal agency alongside a critical examination of larger historical, systemic barriers. As Janks (2010) contends, "issues of access and diversity are tied to issues of power; to questions of domination and subordination; to processes of legitimation and negation, of inclusion and exclusion" (p. 12). She questions how adult learners may be viewed from a deficit perspective and argues that a critical approach to literacy provides analytical tools to identify hegemonic practices (2010, p. 8-10). hooks (1994) recalls how troubling she found poet Adrienne Rich's observation that "This is the oppressor's language yet I need it to talk to you" (p. 169). In recognizing the brutal effects of being forced to absorb the dominant language of colonizers, hooks also recognises the power of the imagination as a form of counterculture:

> *I imagine them [enslaved Black people] hearing spoken English as the oppressor's language, yet I imagine them also realizing that this language would need to be possessed, taken, claimed as a space of resistance. I imagine that the moment they realized the oppressor's language, seized and spoken by the tongues of the colonized, could be a space of bonding was joyous. (p. 169)*

hooks sees that any dialogue must then be followed by actions to bring about material changes. Her critical literacy approach is similar to Paulo Freire's (1970/2021) problem posing. Problem posing allows people to have a strong voice in the direction of their learning and use their imaginations to move them toward a more equitable society. Through more critical and creative approaches to literacy, there is the potential for stories that shape our identities in powerful ways to come to fruition.

Research study

This Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) funded study explores multiliteracies in teaching adolescents and adults and attained clearance by the Review Ethics Board (REB). This paper focuses specifically on innovative arts-based adult education organisations that teach music, drama, and visual arts through educational strategies consistent with a multiliteracies approach including an art gallery; an immigration museum; a government English language learning institute; and a chamber music organisation that offers interactive performances. Participants included adult educators and learners who had options around face-to-face interviews; observations; document analysis; or secondary data analysis of original film footage shot in these spaces.

Research questions

A subset of research questions that have guided the larger SSHRC study are as follows:

1. In what ways does arts-based education promote learning in adult community-based organizations?
2. Does multimodality offer unique perspectives into the value of arts-based learning?

Methodology

We used a multiple case study approach (Stake, 2005) as a part of our research design. Constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2014) methodology requires researchers to acknowledge and be conscious of their positionality. We recognize our own positionality as white, straight, middle-class women working as researchers in universities. Charmaz

(2014) comments that researchers must be reflexive about the research process. She states, "We are not scientific observers who can dismiss scrutiny of our values by claiming scientific neutrality and authority" (p. 27). Constructivist grounded theory is an iterative methodology. It involves (1) codes that use gerunds and line-by-line coding; (2) focused coding to create short summary points and make comparisons across the data; (3) memo-writing to develop thick descriptions and analytical perspectives. This methodology was employed in coding the data in our study.

The research included semi-structured face-to-face interviews approximately 1 hour in length; in-depth observation visits of 3-4 hours approximately 4 times over 1 to 3 months; and document analysis of teaching materials including lesson plans or exemplars. Our study also included original film footage of various adult learning spaces that are showcased on our web platform found at www.multiliteraciesproject.com. All participants had options to decide how to participate and to review their transcripts, photographs, or film footage.

Limitations of the study

Giving participants options around how they might participate made comparisons across the data set uneven. The REB put the research on pause during the pandemic, which in some cases resulted in long delays midway through the data collection phase. Another limitation was that the study was carried out in just two different provincial regions in Canada.

Findings and discussion

Although most of the community-based organisations that we studied did not name multiliteracies as a framework for developing their programming, they identified strongly with the main tenets of the theory when we described them in our recruitment posters/letters. Throughout our research, participants discussed the power of multimodality to increase the scope of ways to communicate and showed great awareness of equity, diversity, and inclusion issues. The mandate of many arts-based organisations is to broadly connect with the public who may not feel comfortable in more traditional venues like concert halls or classrooms. Adult education is often situated in community-based

contexts, ranging from centres for literacy and immigration to museums and local recreation halls.

Carey Jewitt (2017) articulates four main theoretical propositions underpinning the concept of multimodality which we use to analyse the data from our study. Since multimodality is a defining feature of multiliteracies theory, in coding and analysing the data, we have paid particular attention to multimodality in our data sources. Jewitt is a leading researcher in the field of multimodality who has worked with Gunther Kress and Theo Van Leeuwen, who also do some research in adult education in formal and non-formal contexts. These three researchers are credited with developing foundational and evolving contemporary theorizations around social interpretations of multimodality. In what follows, we examine the ways that multimodality offers insight into adult arts-based pedagogy.

Proposition one: Language is only one modality amongst many modes to communicate

Jewitt (2017) expands on this first theoretical proposition underlying multimodality:

> *Language is widely taken to be the most significant mode of communication; this is particularly so in contexts of learning and teaching. Multimodality, however, proceeds on the proposition that representation and communication always draw on a multiplicity of modes, all of which have the potential to contribute equally to meaning. (p. 15)*

Thus, Jewitt (2017) argues that reading and writing are not privileged as better than other modes in communication practices. One research participant in our study, Linda Lord, is an an adult educator in the organisation Arts Can Teach who believes that arts-based education and multimodality tap into adults' emotions and experiences. She also has her own practice in which she works with adults and youth in recovery programs. Over decades, Linda has facilitated sessions with women who have experienced trauma often due to domestic violence. Linda invites these women to "use expressive writing to bring meaning and understanding to things that have happened to them in their lives that really defy meaning." She explains why multimodality contributes to therapeutic expressive arts-based pedagogy:

> *Just knowing that when you are able to layer modalities, every experience goes deeper into the next modality. So if you and I just did a drama exercise, it would be okay. If I had you listening to music, then you would be able to have a richer drama experience. If I had you doing meditation and movement and then drama, that experience would be even deeper because now I have connected your mind, your body, and your soul. And then we are using everything that we have available to us.*

Linda observes that journaling is greatly enriched when combined with other modalities in reflective learning experiences through drama, music, meditation, and movement. Traumatic experiences require patience and great courage to work through. Merriam and Baumgartner (2020) affirm that the narrative arts, as we see in this example of journaling to work through trauma, strengthens adult learners' ability to reflect: "Individual narratives are how we story our own lives. Personal narratives involve reflection on one's life story and can be empowering" (p. 258). By giving more attention in teaching practice to modes not always traditionally recognized for their value to contribute toward providing adult learners with ways to broach their emotions, these modes might offer learners what Wilson et al. (2021) refer to as "creating as a means of self-definition" (p. 577). In their own critical arts-based method of research as Women of Colour engaged in artistic practice, they reflect, "We assembled media, but we also (re)assembled our imaginations, our self definitions, and histories in an effort to make sense of our multidimensional worlds" (Wilson et al, p. 577). Thus, arts-based learning intertwines spiritual, somatic, and intellectual learning to encourage perceiving our identities wrought anew through exploring our interactions with the broader world.

In adult education, traditional teaching strategies include group discussions or reflections incorporated into academic writing assignments. Arts-based learning draws upon other modalities. Engaging with different media can stimulate imagination and offer alternative forms of representation. Thus, educators can have learners create a collage, write and perform a skit, or generate a piece of music or poetry as an alternative means of fostering reflection and deeper forms of learning.

To return to Jewitt's (2017) point that a multiplicity of modes "have

the potential to contribute equally to meaning" (p. 15), we see that music can be a powerful form of communication across diverse cultures and languages. One of our participants, Amy Ley, is the Director of 4th Wall Music, which is a chamber music group that breaks down barriers, the 4th wall, between audiences and musicians. Amy speaks to the emotional dimension of music. She comments that music has the potential to convey meaning as much, if not more so, than oral or written language in some instances:

> *You can be in a room full of people who do not speak the same language and [are] all listening to the same piece of music, and you can all be crying even though you cannot verbally communicate with one another; you can all experience the feeling that the music is expressing.*

These unique place-based concerts promote an openness to considering possibilities for what arts-based pedagogy can look like in theory and practice. In our field note observations, at one 4th Wall Music concert that took place along a riverbank, the gurgling water as well as birds singing in unison with the opera singer and string instruments invited listeners to engage their senses through multimodality. Magro and Pierce (2016) call for designing curriculum "in meaningful, artful, and socially-relevant ways" (p. 192) to invite learners to develop their creative capacities. In this concert, the focus was on environmentalism and conservation of local nature sanctuaries. If the public is to care about sustainability, they need to feel a connection to the environment itself. Multimodality helps to foster these "socially-relevant ways," and thus may also serve to shift perspectives on being engaged citizens who take action to bring about sustainability.

Adult educators can use dramatic role-play or music to bridge with reading or writing activities to promote creative, reflective learning spaces. For learners who are reticent to express themselves via traditional academic forms such as writing, being asked to express themselves in a more multidimensional and multimodal way can sometimes make all the difference to their motivation and sense of inclusion. Storytelling may come easier for some learners through a variety of modes (i.e. visualizing stages of their lives through drawings or using clay to build a model of their ideal workplace).

Proposition two: Each mode does distinct social communicative work

Jewitt (2017) elaborates on this second proposition that each mode serves its own specific purpose in terms of social engagement and communication. She points out: "Multimodality assumes that all modes have, like language, been shaped through their cultural, historical and social uses to realize social functions" (p. 16). To put it another way, every gesture, spatial design, and visual depiction is embedded in a specific social, cultural, and historical context.

For example, pumpkin carving is a traditional art form Canadians engage in to celebrate Halloween. From a social perspective, pumpkin carving is usually done as a family activity. It's an evening of brainstorming carving designs and taking turns at hollowing out and carving the pumpkin. This inanimate object is imbued with a symbolic significance of being spooky, yet also signals an invitation to children to "Trick or Treat" on Halloween when people are giving out candy. Historically, Halloween is attributed to being brought over to Canada by Scottish and Irish immigrants in the 1800s. The Celtic origins of Jack-o'-lanterns, wearing costumes, and pumpkin carving contests are still very popular today. From a cultural perspective, pumpkin carving is a symbolic indicator of the changing seasons. The pumpkin is a symbol of fall. The fall season is coming to an end when we reach Halloween.

In "The Pumpkin Face Off," Ninia Sotto, a research participant, and an adult educator at the Multicultural Council of Windsor and Essex County, asks English Language Learner (ELL) adults to tell the stories of their home countries through carving Jack-o'-lanterns. This arts-based activity merges Canadian traditions with adult newcomers' heritages as represented through visual symbolism. For instance, one learner depicts a panda on the pumpkin to symbolize his Asian heritage. Ninia, in interview found at www.multiliteraciesproject.com, expounds on how the students in her class went from feeling "not keen" on this activity to embracing their own artistry to symbolize their home cultures. It is called "The Pumpkin Face Off" because the other adult educators serve as judges for a contest to determine the best carvings.

Art and adult educators can disrupt stereotypical views of cultural histories. In recent years, Indigenous educators such as Marie Battiste (2013) have argued that there is a need to develop opportunities to learn

about decolonization. One of our research sites, the Mount Saint Vincent University Art Gallery, worked in partnership with Eyelevel Gallery, presented a travelling exhibition organised and circulated by Truck Contemporary Art, Calgary, entitled "Taskoch pipon kona kah nipa muskoseya, nepin pesim eti pimachihew/Like the Winter Snow Kills the Grass, the Summer Sun Revives." This exhibition of artistic works was curated by Missy LeBlanc for TRUCK Contemporary Art.

In one of the multimedia exhibitions, a video showed the artist, Tsema Igharas, spray paint on an caribou hide the cut-out word "esghanana" which was the Tahltan word for "reclamation." In English, it translated to "give it back to me." For adult learners visiting the art gallery, it took a moment to realize that this video was being projected onto the actual animal hide. The hide was being used as a screen to display the video. In the video, a stark comparison was set up between nature's gentle sounds of wind and images in the forest of greenery contrasted with the modern, industrial spray paint can that Igharas was shaking. The spray paint made a jarring sound as it was shaken and sprayed repeatedly by the artist. The artwork seemed to point to the uneasy tensions of settler colonizers' tools being superimposed on the natural world of Indigenous peoples and their worldviews.

From a multimodal perspective, we need to interpret the very materiality as well as the symbolism of the animal hide in this work of art. At the end of the video, the artist swung the animal hide onto her back like a cape with the cut-out word "esghanana" emboldened in the centre. The red of the spray paint, the fine hair of the animal hide, the movement and contours of the hide on the artist's back – these modalities only took on distinct meaning because of the word "esghanana," pointing to Indigenous cultures' resilience and strength. Adult learners bore witness to a type of decolonization as visualized by this artist drawing upon her cultural knowledge and traditions. Of course, the experience of each adult learner at this exhibition would be in part shaped by their own cultural experiences, heritage, and prior knowledge. Igharas and the other artists in this exhibition invited visitors to learn about the stories of their lived experiences through their artwork. And in doing so, consider the implications of meaningful inclusion of Indigenous peoples through ecological land reparations, reclamation, and reflective attitudes and actions.

As an element of our document analysis in this research, we quote from a booklet given out at the art exhibition that in part spoke to the heavy, enduring legacy of colonialism:

> *Historically, Indigenous peoples learned our languages from spending time on the land and intergenerationally through our parents, grandparents, aunties, and elders. Stories and teachings would be told about the land of how things came to be. Land based intergenerational learning is still the best way to learn an ancestral language, but this is difficult when you do not live on or have access to the land ... How are we expected to survive when we don't have the words to fight?*

We hear echoes of bell hooks' (1994) quoting Adrienne Rich: "*This is the oppressor's language yet I need it to talk to you*" (p. 169). Igharas offered an Indigenous vision of reclamation – of "esghanana" – through artistic form.

Adult educators could create an activity or assignment to help learners think about how they, like this Indigenous artist, could combine technology with other forms of representation in multimodal learning contexts. Elements from nature could be combined with images or sounds mediated through technology to raise opportunities for learners to reflect upon the interface of technology with the natural world. Digital literacies may be expanded as learners explore technological resources (ie. video projections, audio recordings, or interactive software) to represent their ideas. Deeper learning may be fostered as students consider cultural meaning as well as historical connections to articulate their ideas to others.

Proposition three: Specific intertwining of modes contributes to meaning-making

A third proposition underlying the theoretical framework of multimodality is explained by Jewitt (2017) in this way: people "orchestrate meaning through their selection and configuration of modes. Thus, the interaction between modes is significant for meaning-making" (p. 16). Film maker and adult educator, Kim Nelson, who is one of our research participants, conceptualized the Live Doc Project, which is an interactive, multimodal documentary experience between artists, musicians, scholars, and live audiences. The Live Doc Project

focused on the intertwining of modes to generate meaning. For example, in one of these live shows, the documentary explored local ethnic Arabic foods from Windsor, Ontario that were simultaneously being consumed by the audience in real time while they watched the documentary. As Kim noted, the audience experienced taste as a mode to "consume" the documentary. The storyline for the Live Doc Project focused on food and identity within the local Arabic community that spans across the international Windsor, Canada - Detroit, USA border. Adult learners were directly engaged in a live, communal response to the documentary. The answers were not just verbal – the adult educators on stage responded using a variety of modes tailored to the specific questions or comments made by the audience in that moment. For example, they would play music (audio mode) or show film clips (visual, gestural, or oral modes) chosen in that moment in direct response to the audience members' questions.

Arts-based teaching and learning can offer a radical way to reveal the normalizing effects of hegemony and foster democratic learning. Aesthetics are important to think through what Wildemeersch (2019) articulates in a footnote of an editorial. He states, "Biesta speaks of 'citizenship as outcome', rather than of 'citizenship as status', whereby outcome refers to the result of an educational trajectory" (p. 117). What is important here is that citizenship is seen as an active rather than a static term to bring about democratic change. Moreover, lifelong learning, according to Biesta (2017) plays a crucial role in an evolving sense of citizenship for any adult learner. Similarly, the Live Doc Project insists that conversations must allow for a range of opinions, despite the possibility of contesting viewpoints. As Kim reflected in interview:

> *I am also really concerned about how polarized things are getting, and people just stay in their political group. They tend to kind of dehumanize people who have different points of view, and I think there is a real lack of complexity, and so far, the Live Doc Project has been a very respectful discussion. I mean, even sometimes, when people are pushing back on the way we framed the history or the documentary that we presented, it is respectful.*

The Live Doc Project uses dialogic, multimodal artistic engagement to explore the complexities of inclusion and democratic citizenship. It offers an alternative vision to what Rodd and Sanders (2023) have aptly

identified as one of the more insidious characteristics of neoliberalism, in that it "presents a seductive mythology, nullifying our imaginations and hopes that things might be otherwise" (p. 145). By contrast, the performers/documentarians accept the potential unease in not knowing what the audience will say, or how they might react, in what is a completely live interactive performance in which audience members play a key role.

The aesthetics of the music, visuals, and culinary delights contribute to the audience's multimodal analytical critique of the documentary to envisage its argument in multifaceted ways. This is an artistic way to invite citizens to a public forum to discuss the implications of multiculturalism. Similarly, adult educators can be intentional about incorporating cultural and linguistic diversity into their teaching (a main tenet of multiliteracies practice) to foster inclusion. Merriam and Baumgartner (2020) observe that "storytelling, for example, is often used by African American women to teach about the joys and sorrows of life. When teaching these women, instructors could incorporate storytelling as an important method of learning about the topic at hand" (p. 60). An educator can choose content and arts-based forms of learning that mirror the culture of their students.

Proposition four: Signs within multimodality are socially situated

Social environments play a large role in how people interpret and communicate with each other according to Jewitt's (2017) account of the fourth theoretical proposition of multimodality. Arts-based education often draws upon this principle to teach in innovative ways. For example, at the Canadian Museum of Immigration at Pier 21, which is one of our research sites, we went on a tour as part of our observations. On the tour, visitors/adult learners were asked to role play that they were European immigrants from the early 1900s. They had 10 artifacts in front of them, but they could only pack 5 in their bags. Which ones would they choose? Why? The guide asked these visitors to interact with these historic artifacts through the eyes of immigrants who knew they may never have returned to their country of origin. Accordingly, the visitors attained a more empathetic perspective of how difficult these decisions would have been.

These historical artifacts (objects such as a pair of boots, a musical

instrument, or a favourite doll) are an example of what is called a "sign" in the fields of structuralism and semiotics. Jewitt (2017) explains that signs

> *are shaped by the norms and rules operating at the moment of sign-making, influenced by the motivations and interests of sign-maker in a specific social context. That is, sign-makers select, adapt and refashion meanings through the process of reading/ interpretations of the sign. (p. 17)*

Sign-making is about representation and comprehending the cultural and social significance attributed to objects in the material world. Research within New Literacy Studies (Barton et al., 2000; Street, 2003) contends that literacy is always socially situated. Or, as Street (2003) puts it, "literacy is a social practice, not simply a technical and neutral skill; that it is always embedded in socially constructed epistemological principles" (p. 77). The museum visitor in this role play was a sign-maker who made sense of an historical object by understanding its social value contextualized in another time period. The museum visitor tried to infer its personal, social, and cultural significance to immigrants who had decided this object was more valuable to bring than the many other possessions they were forced to leave behind. Arts-based educators create opportunities to engage in learning through artistic practices that include multimodal thinking, interaction, and judgments.

Socially situated practice means also creating an intangible ambience that fosters inclusion to welcome adult learners who have perhaps experienced marginalization in their lives. Ollis et al. (2018)'s research on Neighbourhood Houses in Australia provides a critique of neoliberal policies, and they suggest that Neighbourhood Houses provide an alternative learning space that genuinely engages in Freirean (1970/2021) dialogic spaces:

> *Social learning in the Neighbourhood House environment with others who have struggled in formal education settings, such as school, coupled with the emphasis on learner inclusion and using inclusive critical teacher pedagogies, assists learners to move beyond these negative past experiences and enables them to recognise themselves as successful learners. We claim all adult learning is a project of identity formation. (p. 473)*

Ollis et al. (2018) point to a wide range of features that create this inclusive environment such as an informal relaxed environment, drawing on students' prior knowledge, and maintaining small class sizes (p. 471). Moreover, the focus on inclusion is so important since these adult learners thus come to feel respected for who they are and gain dignity and confidence in their abilities to trust their intelligence and judgement. It is only when a person or a group of people who have been historically or socially marginalized come to slowly feel a sense of belonging that they are truly able to imagine a sense of hope. Furthermore, it is precisely because of their diverse and unique backgrounds that these learners are seen within the Neighbourhood House experience to offer unique perspectives.

In our research, we see a similar approach amongst adult educators at the Multicultural Council of Windsor and Essex County where Canadian Newcomers learn English and their experiences and home culture are welcomed. Jenny Harris, who taught mostly older learners at the Multicultural Council, noted in interview:

> *I find if you [the adult learners] have never gone to school before, they really feel special now and important. And they see that they are learning, so we are building confidence. I mean, this, for some of them of my students, is their only outing for the day. Otherwise, they would be home. So, this is their purpose, and this is where their friends are.*

Jenny reflected on the importance of social dynamics that played a role in building a sense of community in her classroom, which in turn was pivotal in her adult learners' language development – the social and academic went hand in hand. From our field notes written about Jenny's class, it became clear that many of these older learners were the matriarchs and patriarchs of their families. Their viewpoints mattered to their siblings, adult children, and grandchildren. Thus, if these older learners felt welcomed and valued in their local community, it seemed reasonable to assume that would in turn influence their whole families' perspectives on migrating to this new country. Inclusion can potentially have the reverberating effect of whole communities gaining the self-perception that they are engaged citizens in their societies because intrapersonal relationships with adult educators and peers lead them to feel a greater stake in the social transactions transpiring in their own

lives and of those around them.

In adult education, the social aspect of the classroom or learning space is often best augmented through arts-based learning. Simply allowing adult learners to share artifacts that are meaningful to them can teach abstract concepts like symbolism and multimodal representation. Moreover, it can build relationships, which start with people sharing stories.

Implications for Theory and Practice

This research is gathered from arts-based organisations that engage adults in lifelong learning opportunities to explore socially situated literacies and multimodalities learned through artistic forms. Multiliteracies theory asserts that "a theory of transformation or redesign is also the basis for a theory of learning" (Kalantzis et al., 2016, p. 224). Deepening our understanding of multimodality provides analytical tools to critique communicative practices within arts-based educational spaces to challenge what Brookfield (2018) explains are inequitable societal structures "reproduced as seeming to be normal, natural and inevitable (thereby heading off potential challenges to the system)" (p. 56). Arts-based learning as a form of storytelling challenges how we construct our world views and current patterns of expression throughout the life span. In doing so, democratic viewpoints are nurtured even though that may mean more ongoing debate, lively differences of opinion, negotiations of identity, and evolving definitions of inclusion. The stories of our lives are based on real material realities, yet also shaped through socially constructed, culturally permeated perspectives. We can draw upon theoretical tenets to give us analytical tools to critique power relations that, at times, confront us with oppressive circumstances that are hard to see a way out of, and at other times, provide us with emancipatory opportunities for adult learning. We must seek out those opportunities to make the world a more inclusive and equitable place for all. Arts-based teaching and multimodality generate such opportunities to aid adult learners in augmenting their capacities for creative and critical engagement.

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