

# Intermediate Students' Experiences with an Arts-Based Unit: An Action Research

*Peter Gamwell*

I conducted an action research study with intermediate-level language and literature students, examining meaning making as adolescents engaged in a developmental writing and performance project. The study was guided by theory and research highlighting the valuable role of overt student reflection to improve engagement in learning. Data collection methods included interviews, teacher observations, reflective journals, and audio/videotaped performance. Data analysis was iterative throughout the study, using both within-case and cross-case sampling, but drawing heavily on self-reports as authentic representations of meaning-making. The findings suggest that learning through the arts provides a vehicle for students to become actively engaged in the construction of their own learning

Keywords: arts learning, multiple intelligences, emotional engagement, aesthetics, classroom drama

L'auteur a mené une recherche-action auprès d'élèves suivant des cours de littérature et de langue de niveau intermédiaire, son objectif étant d'étudier le processus de création de sens chez des adolescents participant à un projet impliquant écriture et prestation. L'étude reposait sur des théories et des recherches mettant en relief le rôle clé des réflexions explicites des élèves dans l'amélioration de leur implication dans l'apprentissage. Plusieurs méthodes de collecte de données ont été utilisées : entrevues, observations des enseignants, journaux personnels et prestations enregistrées sur cassettes audio et bandes magnétoscopiques. Les données ont été analysées de façon répétée tout au long de la recherche à l'aide d'échantillons tirés de l'étude elle-même que d'autres études de cas, mais surtout à partir des autoévaluations en tant que représentations authentiques du processus de création de sens. Les résultats donnent à penser que l'apprentissage à travers les arts fournit aux élèves un moyen de s'impliquer activement dans leur propre apprentissage.

Mots clés : apprentissage par les arts, intelligence multiple, implication émotionnelle, esthétique, mise en scène didactique.

---

This study is guided by theory and research that suggests using the arts as a methodology for learning can provide a rich and emotionally

stimulating learning context in which students become personally engaged in their work through exploration, active involvement, and engagement of their particular abilities (Eisner, 2002; Sylwester, 1995; Upitis & Smithrim, 2003; West, 2000; Witherell, 2000). The study is further guided by my personal experiences and observations as an arts educator. These observations opened me to the belief that the arts contribute to classroom learning.

For many years, as a teacher in the Newfoundland and Labrador school system, I produced musicals and rock operas with intermediate and high-school students. These experiences engaged the imagination of students, teachers, and the community alike. The learning that took place throughout the process and preparation of the productions occurred in numerous ways. Of course the participants trained and learned things specific to their own roles: actors learned acting techniques, musicians learned music, and artists learned to draw and paint. However, learning took place at much deeper levels. Students, teachers, and parents learned the importance of collaboration in creating a final product. We learned the power of reaching out to the community at large for solutions that did not lie within the walls of the school; we learned the importance of developing trusting relationships and of the necessity to be dependable; we learned that people whom we had known for a very long time had abilities that we had never suspected and that knowledge transformed not only how we perceived them, but how they came to perceive themselves; and we learned the potential of the arts in representing and communicating ideas in different ways.

These experiences fed my curiosity about the potential contribution of the arts in students' learning and led to my desire to try to translate the approaches that we took in the preparation of our rock operas into the context of a classroom. This perspective ultimately led to a classroom research in my own grade-8 language and literature class. I chose to try an arts-based model in a language and literature class because the connections between language and literature learning and the arts seemed a logical fit to integrate art, music, drama, and dance activities. The purpose of the research was to gain an understanding of meaning making in adolescent students as they explored literature through a series of artistic experiences. In this article, I have described some of the

experiences of the students and addressed the key research question: How do students create meaning created through arts experiences?

#### THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

My inquiry was concerned with studying students' meaning making in a classroom in which I used the arts to help students learn. An important part of this process was the creation of a classroom environment in which the pedagogy was carefully aligned with recent research on learning. Accordingly, the theoretical framework is guided by three central topics related to learning: multiple intelligences theory, emotional engagement, and the aesthetic context of learning. It is further guided by a body of research in the area of arts-based learning.

##### *Multiple Intelligences Theory*

Curriculum and assessment in the school system are often based on the understanding of intelligence as a single capacity that can be measured on a continuum (Gardner, 1993). In challenging this notion, Gardner has suggested that humans have many different intelligences, all of which are distinct and possess autonomous intelligence capacities.

Gardner's multiple intelligences theory has implications for a quite different school environment in which individual differences and proclivities play a central role in defining how curriculum is organized and implemented. Supporting Gardner, Eisner (1998) emphasized the need to develop a more personally referenced curriculum that would place less emphasis on putting all children "through the eye of the same needle" (p.107). Multiple intelligences theory provided a guiding frame for my arts-based classroom, stressing the importance of personalizing students' experiences, a major implication for classroom practice.

##### *Emotion and Learning*

Many scholars have discussed the practical implications of the role of emotion in human learning. Sylwester (1995) stated that emotion is essential in the learning process because it "drives attention which drives learning and memory" (p. 72). According to Csikszentmihalyi (1990),

when learners become immersed in activity, they experience a state of flow, an energized state of mind during which attention becomes undivided and motivation is absolutely intrinsic. Goleman (1995) argued that being able to enter into a state of flow is emotional intelligence at its best, and that it represents the ultimate example of emotions being harnessed in the service of performance and learning.

I found this connection between emotional engagement and learning central to the creation of the learning environment in my arts-based study classroom. This theory not only guided the learning activities in the classroom, but also helped shape the creation of the classroom culture. I discussed with the students on a daily basis the importance of creating and maintaining a supportive and emotionally stable classroom environment in which all felt comfortable to take risks and to explore ideas in different and novel ways.

#### *Aesthetic Context of Learning*

A third characteristic of the arts-based classroom model relates to the potential for students to achieve experience of the aesthetic. Maxine Greene (2001) defined aesthetic learning as an “initiation into new ways of seeing, hearing, feeling, moving, a reaching out for meanings, a learning to learn integral to the development of persons — to their cognitive, perceptual, emotional and imaginative development” (p. 7). Similarly, Eisner (2002) described aesthetic experience as being “pervaded by an emotional tone made possible by the process of being engaged in a work of art” (p. 81), and suggested that the arts provide an opportunity to find out “something about our capacity to be moved” (p. 84).

Both Greene (2001) and Eisner (1998) emphasized the important connection between active involvement in product creation, aesthetic experience, and meaning making. Furthermore, they contended that the arts play a pivotal role in this process. Eisner summarized this connection: “[T]he making of something is a techne, and for good techne one must be artistically engaged and if artistically engaged, then aesthetic considerations and criteria must operate to some extent” (p. 40). Aesthetic education allows individuals to view the world from a

particular and unique perspective, providing rewards for taking the journey itself.

Because the arts have the potential to provide an enjoyable context for learning and to affect students' quality of life, I used this theory to create an environment that maximized the opportunity for as many students as possible to experience aesthetic qualities not only in their own work, but also in the work of their classmates.

#### *Arts-based Learning*

My practical experience has led me to believe that the arts provide an important vehicle for students to explore their learning, an important contribution of the arts to learning (Upitis & Smithrim, 2003; White & Robinson, 2001). Key findings from this research suggest that arts-based learning experiences can contribute to children's engagement in their learning (Upitis & Smithrim, 2003), critical thinking and problem-solving skills (Wolf, 1999), empathy and tolerance for others (Hanna, 2000), ability to work collaboratively in groups (MacDonald, 1992; Wolf, 1999), and self-confidence (MacDonald, 1992).

Some common themes have emerged from research in classrooms in which an arts-based approach has been used in the teaching of language. Placing the arts at the centre of the language curriculum allows for children's expressive interests to guide their approach to learning (Eisner, 2002). The arts activities provide children the opportunity to explore their learning in ways that are personally meaningful, and through this process they often discover new abilities in themselves (Greenhawk, 1997). Some researchers have found that the pursuit of the arts is so rewarding for students that they embrace hard work and develop self-regulatory skills such as setting goals and assuming responsibility for actions (Baum, Owen, & Oreck, 1997).

#### ARTS-BASED CLASSROOM MODEL

Multiple intelligences theory, emotion, and aesthetics have important implications for student learning, and, together with my personal practical experience as an arts educator, informed and guided the design of the arts-based classroom that was the setting of the investigation. In

designing the classroom, I personalized the experiences of the students in the classroom (Gardner, 1993), provided an opportunity for the students to become emotionally engaged with their work (Sylwester, 1995), and encouraged the students to explore the aesthetic qualities associated with such engagement (Eisner, 2002). I anticipated that the experiences within the arts-based classroom would open the students to new potentials and possibilities within themselves and to new ways of creating personal meaning.

#### *Arts-based Activities*

Two main approaches guided the learning activities throughout the study: structured activities and student arts projects. Within the structured activities, I challenged the students to represent their understandings of studied material through different arts forms. For example they were asked to interpret poetry through movement or dance, to create dramatic interpretations of short stories, or to use dance as a catalyst for creative writing. Students also participated in class performances of a variety of literature including "In Flanders Field," "Six Blind Men and an Elephant," and several scenes from *Julius Caesar*. In addition to these activities, each student completed two projects. For the first project, a soundtrack story, the students selected a short piece of classical music to interpret in any way they chose. Their final product included a story read over the music, a video, a group performance, or a dance, with the requirement of a written component. For the second project of the students' own choosing, they chose the nature and form of their projects and used personal strengths and interests. Students had to complete one of these projects as a group collaboration.

At the beginning of the study, I spent a lot of time engaging the students in structured arts-based activities to help them become comfortable with different aspects of artistic performance and to build trust within the class. Trust building and the creation of a caring and safe classroom environment were essential steps in the development of an accepting and risk-free learning culture. Activities included exercises in visualization, movement, conversation, drama, dance, art, speech, and singing.

## METHODOLOGY

This investigation took the form of classroom action research in which I served as both teacher and researcher. Action research is characterized by the belief that learning involves a process of active production rather than passive reproduction of meaning. Elliott (1991) defined action research as “the study of a social situation with a view to improving the quality of action within it” (p. 1). Classroom action research typically employs “the use of qualitative interpretive modes of inquiry and data collection by teachers... with a view to teachers making judgments about how to improve their practices” (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005, p. 561).

I found that action research provided a powerful opportunity to gather data from multiple sources throughout this study and to become thoroughly familiar with the context of the classroom. Furthermore, the intricate connection between me, as teacher and researcher, and the students provided an excellent opportunity to obtain the rich data from which to develop a thick description of the students' experiences. Jungck (2001) also provided a way to understand my research classroom. He has explained that when teachers seek to understand the narratives of others they “introduce more voices and perspectives into their research projects, and in this way introduce more polyvocality and perspectivity into their professional knowledge base” (p. 342).

### *Participants*

The participants in this study were the 26 students in my grade-8 language and literature class. Data collection methods included journals, video and audio recordings, artifacts, and observations. This multiple source of data collection provided a means of triangulation. The lengthy duration of the study allowed for collection of an enormous amount of data, such that data saturation occurred. Data analysis was ongoing throughout the inquiry.

### *Reflective Journals*

Noting the value that Clandinin and Connelly (1994) place on journals and diaries, I asked all students in the class to keep journals on their arts

activities and document their thoughts, reflections, and feelings as they underwent the experiences. After each activity, students wrote in their journals; I encouraged the students to jot down thoughts and reflections as often as possible. Throughout the study, I emphasized that I wanted students' honest thoughts and opinions and that I would not be offended if they had not enjoyed an activity or if they thought certain aspects of the work were not helpful to them. These reflective journals contributed significantly to the findings of the research.

#### *Field Notes*

My role as teacher and researcher provided a unique opportunity to gather an enormous amount of information through observation. Clandinin and Connelly (1994) have suggested that researchers should consider their relationship to the participant when they write field notes. This relationship has a direct bearing on how researchers compile documentation in that "it makes a difference as we create field notes if we see ourselves as recorders of events "over there" or if we see ourselves as "characters in the events" (p. 422). As teacher, I was close to the events and student experiences, allowing for careful, precise, and immediate documentation of my observations. Throughout the study, I took careful field notes during and after each lesson, including information about the students' projects, their specific comments during the classes either to me or to each other, and my observations of individual students and groups of students.

#### *Videotapes*

There was major emphasis on artistic performance in this classroom, which provided a rich and compelling source of data that contributed enormously in developing a thick description of the students' construction of their own understandings of the material. Many performances, recorded as audiotape or videotape, contributed to this study in two distinct ways. First, the tapes provided immediate feedback to the students as part of the process of constructing their artistic presentations. Second, they provided an excellent record, not only of the

product of the students' work, but the processes leading to the final product.

I analyzed information gathered from reflective journals, field notes, and videotapes and audiotapes, together with my observations, throughout the study, and sorted these data into relevant categories. Once I completed the analysis of individual participant's experiences, I compared these findings across the participants (Yin, 1994).

The theoretical framework of this study is underpinned by the belief that classroom learning might be enhanced by focusing on the individual abilities of students (Gardner, 1993), by encouraging emotional engagement with the learning material (Sylwester, 1995), and by providing an aesthetic context to the learning environment (Eisner, 2002). It is further contended that an arts-based approach to teaching and learning can provide a context in which these conditions can be successfully fostered. I analyzed the data against the backdrop of my theoretical framework looking for themes that emerged from the experiences of the students in the arts-based classroom. I coded the data with specific models of learning and cognition in mind, looking for evidence to support or disconfirm the components of multiple intelligences theory, the connection between emotion and learning, and the contribution of aesthetic context to the meaning-making experiences of the students in the arts based classroom. Furthermore, I looked for data that spoke to the effectiveness of the arts-based classroom as a context for holistic learning.

## FINDINGS

I developed five major findings in answer to my key research question: how do students create meaning through arts experiences. I categorized these findings as follows: active engagement and focused attention, emotional engagement, contextual memory, social construction of meaning, and personal choice and control.

### *Active Engagement and Focused Attention*

Active involvement through arts experiences provided a catalyst for students' creativity that led them to explore their ideas in novel and

creative ways. Andy, a 14-year-old boy, created a silent video which was inspired by Aaron Copland's "Fanfare for the Common Man."

In my project, I did a silent video. I tried to put in the video what I saw in my mind when I heard the music. Most of the pictures in the video had something to do with pain, effort, and struggle. Then I made the music and the movie the same length. To convey my meaning better, I kept it the same, but provided it through different ways. I convey it through classical scenes, religious scenes, action scenes, and sports scenes. (Student, Andy)

Andy's words provide a sense of his journey in representing his personal interpretation of the music through video images. Andy described clearly how the music acted as a catalyst for his imagination.

It's almost like the music helps you think . . . you get ideas much faster with the music. When you listen to the music, it almost, like, triggers something. You like, think of the melody and you get pictures in your mind and then you can get a broad idea. I started with the idea of war and then listened to it more and more times. Then I got the feelings of sorrow and the pain and triumph. (Student, Andy)

Rick was similarly inspired for his soundtrack story, which combined elements of his varied interests in Japanese culture, video games, and Norse mythology. His story, "Time's Scar," was a retelling of the Battle of Ragnarok. Rick described his attention to detail in matching the nuance of the music to the plot of his story.

Well I already knew the music really well. I had listened to it probably a hundred times at least. It was more a matter of coming up with a story that would fit it. I had to write one which would fit and I managed to do that which was good. (Student, Rick)

Although most students reported positively on the active nature of their activities and felt that they contributed to their learning, there were exceptions. One of the class activities involved groups of students creating a tableau depicting the verses of "Six Blind Men and an Elephant." Barbara found this to be somewhat childish and voiced her concerns to me. She stated that she would learn "just as much about the poem through sitting and reading it." Her reaction took me by surprise because, knowing that Barbara loved to act, I was interested to know

why this activity did not capture her attention. She had really enjoyed staging the Forum scene from *Julius Caesar* and, a month following the "Six Blind Men and an Elephant" the exercise, she worked with a partner to present a soundtrack story, which successfully engaged her attention. In a later conversation, Barbara told me that, although she had enjoyed the warm-up arts activities and the dramatization of *Julius Caesar*, the "Six Blind Men and an Elephant" activity had upset her because she felt embarrassed performing in such a small group. Although I thought I had prepared the class well for these experiences and knew the students, I had clearly erred in my judgment in Barbara's case and had offended her sensitivities.

#### *Emotional Engagement*

An important finding from the study relates to the connection between active involvement and emotional engagement in the arts activities, and the contribution of this to the students' construction of personal meaning. This theme emerged repeatedly, most notably in relation to the staging of scenes from *Julius Caesar* and class performances of "In Flanders Fields" and "Six Blind Men and an Elephant." It also emerged very strongly through the experiences during the projects because students reported that the emotional engagement with the material greatly affected their interest in the learning. Many students described how "acting out" scenes helped to connect them to the events. After a class performance of the crowd scene following Caesar's assassination, Alice and Ann had a positive reaction to this experience.

I found learning this way much easier to understand, because you actually become your character, which makes you think of them as human, and not just fictional characters. (Student, Alice)

I thought it was pretty cool how we acted it out instead of just sitting and reading. We actually got into it and I think that I learned more this way. I now know who killed the guy, and I know how Mark Anthony "captured" the crowd with his words. Acting out and seeing others act out the poem kinda helped me understand it... And it was fun to do. It's A LOT better than sittin' in our seats just readin' the poem and fallin' asleep. (Student, Ann)

A defining moment of the study occurred in the classroom when Russ, working with his partner Chris, chose an intensely personal topic. The two boys wanted the topic of their project to be secret until it was shown. I agreed to this on the condition that they maintained a reflective journal on making the project. The project they finally presented was a video entitled "Tribute," which was a memorial to Russ's grandfather who had died recently. Set to the Canon in D by Pachelbel, this video showed Russ walking slowly through a graveyard, eventually kneeling beside his grandfather's grave, placing the flowers on the ground, and then retracing his steps. The production was impeccably timed, and beautifully symmetrical in design: the opening bars of music showed Russ opening the cemetery gates, and as the final bar played, Russ closed the latch on the gate, and walked into the distance.

In a grade-8 class, this was an enormous risk for Russ. It could quite easily have led to teasing and harassment. However, the response of the class to this video was most interesting. There was not a sound as the boys showed their video; for several moments afterwards, there was silence in the room. Many students had to wipe tears from their eyes. I rarely in my career had seen a presentation quite so personal in nature, and it was certainly novel for the students in the class. The culture of the class had given Ross the confidence to explore and share an intensely emotional and personal moment.

#### *Contextual Memory*

A finding closely related to the link between emotional engagement and learning is the perception of many students that they would more likely remember the learning material that they had experienced through the arts activities, as several students emphasized when reflecting on the *Caesar* lesson. Referring to the class performance of the Forum scene from *Caesar*, Alice commented in her reflective journal on the value of this experience, a statement that she repeated four months later in an interview.

. . . it was really forceful and it made you remember because it was as if you were in that position. Something that you would not forget. You remember it a lot better than history work. (Student, Alice)

It was really fun for everyone . . . if we had sat down and read it as a book, no-one would have remembered it. Yet I'm sure you could ask anyone in the class and they'll remember it. (Student, Alice)

Mitch also described how much he enjoyed learning through acting and his perception that it helped him to remember.

I found it very easy to remember, our teacher let us do something fun like yelling . . . He let us be the townspeople who were getting angry with Marc Anthony. I tend to get bored whenever a teacher just starts to drone on and on. . . . When something is fun I usually remember it better than something that is boring. (Student, Mitch)

Other students made similar observations in relation to activities that had affected them. For some students, music provided memorable moments; for others, a video or drama. For some students the memorable experiences were sad or poignant; for others, the moments were humorous or ironic. Sometimes these moments occurred, as was the case with Andy, during a class that I was leading. Other times, they occurred when, after a long struggle in problem solving, a group had a breakthrough and discovered the direction in which they were going.

Laura made a most interesting comment to me regarding the contribution of active involvement to her learning. Following the *Julius Caesar* performance, she mentioned in conversation that acting helped her to remember things. When I asked her why, she responded, "that's easy — because it helps me pay attention. If we just read it in a book, I probably wouldn't have been paying attention."

#### *Social Construction of Meaning*

One important aspect of this study for me as both teacher and researcher was the opportunity to watch the students work together and collaborate over an extended period of time. The experiences they underwent were as complex and diverse as the projects they chose to work on. The decision making involved a variety of dynamics, including struggle, argument, agreement, disagreement, and humour. Within the groups, I found the allocation of tasks to individual members fascinating to watch. Students came to know, understand, and appreciate each other's strengths and weaknesses; this knowledge became an important aspect

in their decision making and a significant aspect of the negotiation of the work.

The opportunity to create arts-based projects through group collaboration was extremely beneficial for some students and contributed very positively to their personal learning. Ann, Felicia, and Jane worked on a puppet show of the fairy tale "Rapunzel," an involved procedure. They wrote the script; planned the presentation; designed, made, and painted the puppets; found a puppet stage they remembered the grade-1 teacher had; learned their lines; practised for hours in the hall, at home, or wherever they could find a space; and finally presented the puppet show. Both Felicia and Jane commented positively about the value of this experience.

the most important thing is to work with your group and be a team. It's not just a one person thing, it is a group thing. (Student, Felicia)

I think it was a good learning experience because I learned how to work in a group and that when you are working in a group everyone has their own responsibilities. (Student, Jane)

Jane also wrote in her journal that a benefit of project work was that she "learned that we have a lot of creative people and a lot of artistic people in our class."

Laura proved quite a challenge at the beginning of the study. She regularly talked out of turn in class and was reluctant to complete written work. The written work she did hand in was extremely untidy and poorly constructed. Only when Laura had the opportunity to engage in the first group project did she begin to show her abilities. Her group decided to rewrite and then video their own version of the movie *Scream*. At the end of the study I showed Laura a piece of written work she had handed in at the beginning of the project and her written script for the rewrite of *Scream*, which was very nicely written, with careful attention to grammar and punctuation. When I asked about this difference, she explained that she had taken a lot more care with the *Scream* assignment because she was working with her group and felt proud of it. This sentiment was reflected in a conversation I later had with Laura's mother.

They have had to work as a group to learn lines and make a product, and they will learn not to laugh or make fun of others; as a group they will all have to go through it. From the personal end of it, it is nice to see her taking an interest and focusing more on the school work. It has taken this [research] to actually bring it out. It is nice for me to come home and have her excited about something she has done today. She suddenly wants to share what has gone on at school and this is making her more family oriented. (Laura's mother)

As I observed Laura in the classroom, it became clear that drama created the connection for her two strengths: her love of performance and her strong interpersonal skills.

Alice and Rick both encountered difficulty during the group sessions in the classroom. Although they worked in groups that eventually produced successful projects, they required careful supervision. During the group-work sessions in class, there was a lot of activity in the classroom. Although most students adapted to this environment and focused successfully on the task at hand, both Alice and Rick, who were close friends outside the class and shared common interests, found every opportunity to gravitate to each other and avoid the work. This behaviour not only affected their own productivity in the classroom but, because they would engage others in the conversations and interactions, distracted other groups. I addressed this problem in several ways, but the eventual resolution of the problem occurred as a result of two main factors. First, as the other groups in the class became focused and engaged in their projects, the members of these groups became intolerant of the interruptions and were vocal about it. Second, members of Alice and Rick's group became quite annoyed with them as the project presentation date approached and put pressure on them to participate.

#### *Personal Choice and Control*

The arts projects allowed students the flexibility and freedom to control their own learning and to personalize their meaning making. Andy described how having choice over the nature and direction of his work was important for his learning.

I enjoy the freedom to be able to do what you like. You know, no boundaries; to be able to express in a project the way you want without being told what you have to do.

(Student, Andy)

This theme of the connection between choice and engagement in work recurred throughout Andy's interviews and his reflective journal. He spoke at length about how he enjoyed being in a classroom that provided him more control over his decision making.

This was enjoyable because of the method of teaching. You and my teacher last year teach with open thoughts and like letting us get involved with what we are learning.  
(Student, Andy)

Andy contrasted this open approach with more traditional classroom strategies which he characterized as being closed.

The opportunity to make personal choices was also of central importance to Rick. Like Andy, Rick referred to the open nature of the classroom which allowed him to make the learning experiences relevant. Rick really enjoyed discussing issues openly and sharing ideas in a classroom where a variety of perspectives were accepted and encouraged. He had a very negative view of traditional classrooms, referring to them as closed and describing them as being limiting and restrictive.

Creating an open classroom in which students had a high degree of choice and control over the nature and process of their work provides risks and challenges. From the outset of the study, we had discussed as a class that, along with the freedom and choice to develop and work on original ideas, came the individual responsibility to ensure that any work submitted and shown to the class must fall within limits of accepted decency. We had discussed specific parameters in great detail. When one group of three boys played their video, a remake of *The Blair Witch Project*, someone could be heard swearing in the background. I had not noticed this in my initial viewing. When the students heard this during the class viewing, they were uneasy. The three boys themselves were extremely embarrassed and immediately apologized as they turned off the video. I asked the boys what they thought might be an appropriate course of action and, the following day, of their own volition, they again apologized to the class and committed to work over the weekend to produce a more appropriate project. Although this was

certainly a misjudgment on behalf of the boys, I believe their solution supports research that emphasizes the importance of forming caring, respectful relationships with adolescents to facilitate relevant and inviting classroom contexts (Moje, 2000). Although they undoubtedly made an error of judgment, the classroom culture created the context in which they could quickly find their own solution.

## CONCLUSION

### *Active Engagement and Focused Attention*

Eisner (1992) identified common core contributions of the arts to learning. He argued that the potential of the arts to provide opportunity for expression and discovery is of central importance. Of these two, the expressive function of the arts is more obvious. Music, art, drama, and dance are specific vehicles through which artists expressively represent their ideas and feelings, convey their meanings, and share them on the public stage. By actively engaging in the creation of works of art, students come to experience and explore their individual capacity to feel, imagine, and respond. Eisner further contended that by engaging in art making, be it visual, musical, or kinesthetic, students undergo a process of discovery. He explained that "as children learn to manipulate, manage, and monitor the nuances of voice, movement, and visual form they discover the effects that their own fine-tuning achieves" (p. 85). Because the arts encourage and promote such activities, they provide students the opportunity to experience the aesthetic aspect of their being through exploration of "imaginative possibilities inherent in quality educational experiences" (Frazier, 2003, p. 70).

The experiences and the input of the students in this study lend themselves to a deeper understanding of this process of discovery. Through the voices of the students, a strong sense of their personal journeys of discovery emerges as they constructed and explored meanings through their projects. The novelty of this experience for the students was grounded in the fact that they were not used to exploration through the arts. Many students certainly had experienced singing in choirs, participating in dance classes, or engaging in art making, but the

opportunity and the expectation of using these capacities to create in the classroom was novel for them. The novelty of arts as a vehicle for learning played an important role in focusing students' attention and contributing to their meaning making. This finding supports Smagorinsky's (1996) contention that "through the act of translating their thoughts into a new material product, learners often develop new ideas about the object of their thinking" and that "students construct meaning through deliberation on the material they produce" (p. 37).

#### *Emotional Engagement*

The goal of all actors is to be so convincing in their roles that the audience is temporarily disengaged from the reality of their own lives. In so doing, they create a new reality and extract empathy for the condition that they are portraying. This phenomenon, the "suspension of disbelief," provides such a powerful emotional experience that audiences truly empathize with the character and/or situation being portrayed, and, for a period of time, forget their own realities.

For many of the students in the class, involvement in the arts experiences provided a glimpse of such a moment, and such moments are memorable and powerful learning experiences. The students temporarily constructed a new reality that allowed them to explore feelings and sensations that were different for them. This explains why so many of the students used such powerful emotive language in describing the enactment of *Julius Caesar* and why they reported things such as "it was like being in Rome," or "it was like I was a Roman citizen," or "I know I will never forget it."

Several researchers have emphasized the importance of creating respectful and caring learning environments in which adolescents feel comfortable to take risks in their learning (Moje, 2000). Shafer (2002) suggested that "being bold and courageous — and eventually having fun through creativity — comes from a setting that is devoid of intimidating, prescriptive pedagogy" (p. 103). We had worked extremely hard as a group to create a positive and non-judgmental classroom culture, and I believe it was this important condition that allowed students to take risks with their learning. Barbara's experience with the

“Six Blind Men and an Elephant” activity, however, serves as a reminder that classroom activities must be designed and implemented with great care. Students, especially adolescents, are extremely sensitive to their social context. Negative experiences can have devastating and long-term effects on their self-esteem and on their learning. Ingleton (1999) reminds us that “shame and pride are powerful emotions in learning because they are part of social bonding, and the basis of self-identity and self-esteem. . . . In learning one works hard at minimising risk to avoid shame and the lowering of self esteem” (p. 9).

#### *Contextual Memory*

The experiences of the students regarding contextual memory support research conducted by Langer and Bayliss (1994), who concluded that varying the target of attention, whether a visual object or an idea, apparently improves memory of it. An important aspect of this finding is that the complex and diverse variety of activities undertaken by the students in my classroom provided the necessary context in which many of them had the opportunity to experience such emotionally memorable moments. These moments were truly important in the construction of their meaning making. Art-making, a process of expression and discovery, is about the weaving together of ideas into a unified, coherent creation (Eisner, 1998). The performance of art involves a very similar process, but is concerned with creation through interpretation and performance. Both creation and performance of art are activities that involve working the individual parts and sections into a completed form, and it is a process in which “aesthetic satisfactions are pervasive” (Eisner, 1998, p. 37). By their very nature, such experiences are intensely emotional, and this emotionally charged aspect of aesthetic process and experience, I believe, prompted the students to voice their beliefs. They will likely remember these experiences.

#### *Social Construction of Meaning*

Having the students work in groups on their projects had many benefits. First, students took the time to ensure that they aligned their choice of project to the specific interests and abilities of the people in the group.

Second, on a very practical level, students worked closely within the groups to ensure that the work was of good quality. This concern with quality developed because once the groups had made decisions about the nature of their projects, they developed a sense of ownership among group members. This ownership focused the groups on the goal of successful and timely completion of the work. Students worked from their areas of strength: the artists concentrated on the artwork, the musicians focused on the music, the actors and actresses took the lead in dramatic activities, the comedians kept things in perspective, and the natural leaders emerged to organize and co-ordinate. Third, most students, precisely because they were working from their areas of strength, met with success. Through this process, many students came to recognize and appreciate strengths in each other that they had not previously known about. All students had the opportunity to have their moment in the educational sun, and to have their peers recognize their abilities. This finding supports literature that emphasizes the important contribution of shared meaning making to the development of a positive learning environment (Carico, 2001). The connection between social construction of meaning and quality work aligns closely with Wolf (1999), who found that students working on collaborative opera projects became increasingly expert at “active participation in the form of taking turns and asking questions” and at “coherent work towards quality” (p. 94).

I believe there were several key moments in the course of the study, moments of collective “felt learning” when the learning culture of the classroom took enormous leaps, and in all cases these occurred as a result of things students did. Perhaps the most powerful of these was Russ’s presentation of his tribute to his grandfather. In showing this video to the class he took an enormous risk. Through his video he brought his classmates to an intensely personal aspect of his life: he shared his grief. In doing so, he shifted the context of the shared meaning making in the class and gave permission for others to be more risky in the types of experiences they shared.

Of course, Alice and Rick’s experiences highlight the difficulties encountered when I set up group work. It is not an easy thing to accomplish with total success. As Smagorinsky (1995) has pointed out,

“groups are not a panacea for involving students, as is often believed, but rather are highly dependent on the patterns of discourse that surround them in the overall instruction” (p. 25).

#### *Personal Choice and Control*

In many ways the theme of personal choice and control most informed and guided the findings of the study. This study makes a unique contribution to our understanding of students' perception of the role of personal choice in their meaning making. It provides a perspective on how the students see their opportunity to choose because it relates more broadly to their learning. The opportunity to have input into the nature and direction of their work resulted in many students exploring topics that were infused with personal meaning. Many students chose to explore topics of particular emotional significance and found the confidence to share these intimate aspects of their lives and themselves through in-class performances. The positive and supportive emotional climate in the classroom provided the necessary context for students to feel comfortable to take such risks. The element of choice allowed students to explore their learning through areas of strength that gave them more chance to meet with success. In this way, they felt more confident about themselves; their classmates came to recognize in them abilities they might not have previously suspected. The active nature of the arts activities gave the students the opportunity to engage in meaning making in ways that were new for them. Because of the personal nature of many of the activities and the projects, students reported their belief that they would likely remember them for a long time. This finding supports a body of research that stresses the importance of addressing the individual needs and strengths of students to provide them with the opportunities to have a voice in their own education (Gardner, 1993).

#### DISCUSSION

Cole and Knowles (2000) pointed out that, in spite of their centrality in schools and classrooms, “seldom have students themselves been asked about how they experience the educational process, schools, classrooms,

and teachers" (p. 95). I believe a key strength of this study is that it provides a unique window into the world of adolescent students exploring learning through arts experiences. Through the voices of the students, we hear how the arts activities provided a vehicle for them to become actively engaged in the construction of their own learning. The students delighted in the opportunity to exercise choice over the nature and direction of their projects (Gardner, 1993), and responded to this opportunity by producing work that was often very personal and compelling in nature. The degree to which the students became emotionally invested and connected to the experiences (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990) was evident through much of their reporting. They explored their meaning making in a variety of different ways and came to see and appreciate in each other abilities and characteristics that had not previously been apparent to them (Eisner, 1992). The social aspect of the meaning making contributed to the development of a supportive, open learning environment and a true sense of community. Within this learning culture, the students felt comfortable to take risks with their thinking (Langer, 1997), to engage physically, cognitively and emotionally in problem solving (Sylwester, 1995; Upitis & Smithrim, 2003), and to create and perform works of art that were both aesthetically satisfying (Eisner, 2002; Greene, 2001) and memorable (Langer & Bayliss, 1994) for them. These observations closely relate to findings by Upitis and Smithrim (2003) who suggested that children in arts enriched classrooms tended to be engaged in their learning.

The findings of this study report on the experiences of one class of students in one school. Although these findings do, I believe, provide an interesting window into the world of the students who were involved in this classroom, further research investigating the learning experiences of students in different contexts would provide the opportunity to compare and contrast the findings emerging from this investigation. It would be interesting and informative to design further classroom action research studies to investigate arts-based learning in other subject areas such as social studies and science. Such studies might provide invaluable information about the ways in which the arts can be used as a vehicle for learning. This, in turn, would serve to broaden and deepen educators' understanding of the different ways in which students experience their

learning and contribute to the creation of successful learning environments where more students are engaged more of the time.

#### REFERENCES

- Baum, S., Owen S., & Oreck, B. (1997). Transferring individual self-regulation processes from the arts to academics. *Arts Education Policy Review*, 98(4), 32-39.
- Carico, K. (2001). Negotiating meaning in classroom literature discussions. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, 44(6), 510-518.
- Clandinin, D. J., & Connelly, F. (1994). Personal experience methods. In N. Denzin & Y. Lincoln (Eds.), *The handbook of qualitative research* (pp. 413-427). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Cole, A., & Knowles, J. (2000). *Researching teaching: Exploring teacher development through reflexive inquiry*. Needham Heights, MA: Allyn and Bacon.
- Csikszentmihalyi, M. (1990). *Flow: The psychology of optimal experience*. New York: Harper and Row.
- Eisner, E. (1992). The misunderstood role of the arts in human development. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 73(8), 591-595.
- Eisner, E. (1998). Rethinking literacy. In E. Eisner (Ed.), *The kind of schools we need; Personal essays* (pp. 9-20). Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Eisner, E. (2002). *The arts and the creation of mind*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Elliot, J. (1991). *Action research for educational change*. Milton Keynes, UK: Open University Press.
- Frazier, C. (2003). Building community through poetry: A role for imagination in the classroom. *English Journal*, 92(5), 65-70.
- Gardner, H. (1993). *Multiple intelligences: The theory in practice*. New York: BasicBooks.
- Goleman, D. (1995). *Emotional intelligence: Why it can matter more than I.Q.* New York: Bantam.
- Greene, M. (2001). *Variations on a blue guitar: The Lincoln Institute lectures on aesthetic education*. Williston, VT: Teachers College Press.
- Greenhawk, J. (1997). Multiple intelligences meet standards. *Educational*

- Leadership*, 54(6), 62-64.
- Hanna, J. (2000). Learning through dance. *American School Board Journal*, 187(6), 47-48.
- Heathcote, D. (1984). Drama and learning. In L. Johnson and C. O'Neill (Eds.), *Dorothy Heathcote: Collected writings on education and drama* (pp. 90-102). London: Hutchinson & Co.
- Ingleton, C. (1999, July). Emotion in learning: A neglected dynamic. Paper presented to the HERDSA conference, Melbourne, Australia.
- Jungck, S. (2001). How does it matter? Teacher inquiry in the traditions of social science research. In G. Burnaford, J. Fischer, & D. Hobson, D. (Eds.), *Teachers doing research* (pp. 329-343). New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Kemmis, S., & McTaggart, R. (2005). Participatory action research. In N. Denzin & Y. Lincoln (Eds.), *The Sage handbook of qualitative research* (pp. 559-603). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Langer, E. (1997). *The power of mindful learning*. Reading, MA: Perseus Books.
- Langer, E., & Bayliss, M. (1994). Mindfulness, attention, and memory. Manuscript, Harvard University.
- MacDonald, C. (1992). Effects of an in-service program on eight teachers' attitudes and practices regarding creative dance. *The Elementary School Journal*, 93(1), 99-115.
- Moje, E. (2000). *All the stories we have: Adolescents' insights about literacy and learning in secondary schools*. Newark, DE: International Reading Association.
- Shafer, G. (2002). Tell me a story. *English Journal*, 92(2), 102-106.
- Smagorinsky, P. (1995). Multiple intelligences in the English class: An overview. *English Journal*, 84(8), 19-26.
- Smagorinsky, P. (1996). Multiple intelligences, multiple means of composing: An alternative way of thinking about learning. *NASSP*, 80(583), 11-17.
- Sylwester, R. (1995). *A celebration of neurons: An educator's guide to the human brain*. New York: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.
- Upitis, R., & Smithrim, K. (2003). *Learning through the arts: National assessment final report*. Submitted to The Royal Conservatory of Music, Toronto.
- West, D. (2000). An arts education: A necessary component to building the whole child. *Educational Horizons*, 78(4), 176-178.

- White, D., & Robinson, R. (2001). Critical thinking and artistic creation. *Journal of Aesthetic Education*, 35(2), 77-85.
- Witherell, N. (2000). Promoting understanding: Teaching literacy through the arts. *Educational Horizons*, 78(4), 79-83.
- Wolf, D. (1999). Why the Arts Matter in Education. In E. Fiske (Ed.), *Champions of change: The impact of the arts on learning* (pp. 91-98). The Arts Education Partnership and The President's Committee on the Arts and Humanities. Retrieved on June 17, 2005 from <http://artsedge.kennedy-center.org/champions/pdfs/ChampsReport.pdf>
- Yin, R. (1994). *Case study research: Design and methods* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.