

by **Katharine Childs**

# Giving Students ROOTS and WINGS



Fig. IV

## Introduction

**I am an adult educator with over thirty years of experience in the teaching profession. For the past twenty years I have been a Language Arts teacher and an academic mentor working with adults enrolled in a full-time academic high school program in the province of Quebec.**

**Our student population could best be described as marginalized and generally disaffected; many happen to be young adults from sixteen to nineteen years of age who have previously been unsuccessful in school. A growing number of students have few academic skills; many of them cannot read well and see no reason to improve their skills. For the majority of these people, our school is their last chance at getting a high school diploma – and perhaps qualifying for a job or further training.**

## The Changing Landscape of Adult Education

Over the past seven or eight years, the demographics have drastically changed in adult education in Quebec, causing our adult education centre to experience a number of significant and dramatic changes in its learning culture and in the way that we work with the adults who study with us. The fact that much of our student population is now between the ages of sixteen and nineteen years old has had profound ramifications on our entire environment – changes which have necessitated different approaches to teaching and learning in the centre.

Although many of these younger students come to us with a large number of their required courses completed, a growing percentage of them require an additional three or more years of full-time study to accomplish their stated goal of completing their high school education. Many of them lack positive self-images, demonstrating limited curiosity. They have difficulty in reading and writing, in managing their time, in goal-setting and in persevering at their work. These students are passive and highly dependent upon their teachers. For many, progress is slow, and academic success almost non-existent.

Conventional ('prescriptive') academic courses – even those designed especially for adults – have not been able to address these issues. To counterbalance

this, I have tried to teach by building upon students' individual successes and utilizing their embodied knowledge in an effort to enhance learning that is individually more meaningful and responsive.

## The problem: Secondary III English

I first wondered about certain attitudes towards learning when I noticed that students placed in our English Secondary Level III course seemed to be largely unsuccessful. Those who did pass did so with low grades and only after long periods of time. Even worse – they did it with little, if any, enthusiasm. Many students dropped out after completing one section of the course. Some simply left, claiming the class was too large, the work too hard or that they had better things to do with their time. Others stayed, sporadically attending and rarely handing in work – seemingly defeated by the class itself. Something was definitely wrong.

School records provided data that convinced me that there were problems with this course. Most of the young adults transferring directly into our system from the local high school were placed into this program because of previously completed coursework. Their reading and writing skills were quite poor, but most had already attended and passed the Secondary II Language Arts course. This meant that the majority of the Secondary III class members were between the ages of sixteen and eighteen, the youngest adults in the building. There was a high concentration of young males in this course (over 69 per cent – or sixteen of twenty-three students). After testing, an equally high percentage of these students seemed to be kinesthetic and visual learners – right-brained individuals (MacDonald 2001).

Most students took more than five times as long to complete this course than any other course given in our centre – an average total of 800 hours to complete a 150-hour course. Only 16 per cent – four students out of twenty-three – completed the course at all (Tannahill 2001).

Faced with hard evidence that the existing course was problematic, I probed my most deeply held beliefs about the purpose of education – formal or otherwise – and critically examined the particular place of literacy and curriculum within that larger purpose. I asked myself leading questions: *“Are skills, knowledge and literacy inextricably bound together – and*

*how so?”*, *“What kind of knowledge/skills will my students need to get jobs or continue their training?”* and *“What types of knowledge best enable us to care for ourselves, one another and the world that surrounds us?”*



Fig. V

It occurred to me that the tendency many of us have to identify education exclusively with reading and writing has created a limiting imbalance in most of our schools: the majority of the adult students that I see regularly suffer from this imbalance.

I wanted to find different tools that would allow my learners to become confident and successful. In order for them to be able to express themselves in different ways, I felt my students needed tools that were more

flexible/less confining than the traditional ones, tools that would enable them to express what they apparently were incapable of conveying in conventional language – or in conventional ways.

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## The research question

I wanted to create the kind of classroom atmosphere that would be responsive to and that would embrace the gifts and talents of every person while fostering personal and academic growth.

This led to the larger question: *“What do I consider and accept as ‘literacy’ and ‘learning’ – and what does that entail in terms of personal (and professional) growth for both me and my students?”*

Working from the premise that when one discovers and experiences knowledge and new meanings through interactions between the Self and the world, the whole self – body, mind, and heart – is affected, I instinctively turned to the arts as a possible way of providing opportunities for

connection, and for listening and learning from each other and ourselves.

As a teacher-researcher interested in self-study and reflective practice, I have continually employed a number of arts-based techniques and various artistic representations in my own research, and am familiar with educational research in this field. Much of what I believe about art and the creative process is summed up by Rhoda Kellogg's statement that art is "a visual necessity for achieving mental stability." A vast potential for personal discovery exists when we ground our learning in the artistic experience and process – when we learn to trust in the creative process itself and embrace the relationships with the products that emerge. This is borne out by a number of influential researchers who see art as literacy – a reading and writing of texts – and as a vehicle for personal causation and growth (Greene 2001, 1995, 1978; Eisner 1991; McNiff 1998a, 1998b).

This is not easy for anyone who has been schooled in a traditional system where there is a marked disregard for anything that cannot be directly and immediately perceived – where art is frequently regarded as 'frivolous' and unnecessary to a solid education. It is even more difficult for students who are different, who have not been successful in school but wish to attain an education. I was all the more determined to offer classes of this nature.

In addition, I realized that this issue of literacy was closely aligned with my students' self-esteem, with their valuation and validation within the larger educational system. As a teacher, I also realized that this issue struck close to home: if I believed in the principles of self-directed lifelong learning, I would need to become truly more responsive to all the adults I work with. I came to the conclusion that helping my learners to acquire the roots of belonging



Fig. VI



Fig. I

Art, our class discovered, meant taking action.

and 'mattering', and the wings of individual potential and freedom should be at the centre of everything that I do as an educator. If employing slightly different approaches and techniques could help my students learn the information processing skills they needed to become more successful with certain types of printed material, I was willing to try them.

I had just put together a tentative outline of the new course when one of my most 'resistant' students – a personable and bright man who I shall call Jon – began to work on improving his reading and writing using the creative arts and these arts-based techniques. What I learned from working with him made me realize the tremendous power and promise that working with art and various types of media possesses for significant learning. I found it to be a wonderful tool that promoted self-awareness and self-expression – two of the ingredients that aid self-confidence and lead to personal success/personal causation. I also discovered that this method was an effective way to get disaffected secondary students to 'read' and 'write' different texts.

Since Jon, there have been many other students who have completed these courses, many of them following his lead by using narrative pieces, coupling them with poetry and image texts as a way of articulating their knowledge and helping others to connect to their experiences. The high quality of the work that these students have produced and the soundness of their learning has convinced me that allowing students the freedom and the responsibility to determine what and how they learn is worth 'bending the rules', of trying something new. Because of this, our new three-part Secondary III program with its initial focus on using arts-based techniques as a form of literacy is now firmly established in our adult education centre.

## The New Program

### Roots: The nuts and bolts of the courses

The new Secondary III Language Arts program consists of three separate courses. Although they have different titles, they are actually parts of the same course, each with a slightly different emphasis and a growing complexity of skills. Each course revolves around trying to answer the questions “*Who am I?*” and “*What do I value?*” using different media as reading and writing tools. These questions were chosen because many of our learners have never been asked either of those questions before and had never had to formulate some sort of response to them. I maintain that once we can answer those questions, we can start to get down to the real business of education – getting ourselves ready and fit to lead our own productive lives.

Instead of traditional reading and writing exercises, all students are asked to explore three different media (creative processes), using them as frequently as possible as tools for self-expression. At least one of these must be chosen as the medium of expression for the course – the main creative medium they will use to express themselves, to ‘write’ with.

Class members are encouraged to place their favorite products into a portfolio, although many actually prefer to decorate the classroom walls.

High emphasis is placed on collaboration with other classmates, especially in terms of discussion and helpful feedback.

To round out the courses academically, bits and pieces of work from levels III, IV, and V are included: creative units on interviewing and conducting interviews, and investigative pieces/projects on the definition of ‘heroes’ and ‘the ideal job’.

Student assessment of work submitted is not only solicited, but a required component of each course, and is taken seriously. Final marks are determined only after a consultative process between student and teacher in which the student submits a mark for the completed work and then explains the justification of the mark.

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### Wings: Watching students soar

Along the way we have had to fight two assumptions – the biggest one being that making art is difficult, that it is a magical gift only bestowed on a favored few by the gods. The other its opposite – that making art isn’t really academic work, that an artistic text couldn’t be ‘read’, that none of this could be part of a real education. Neither assumption could be further from the truth.

Art, our class discovered, meant taking action. It was often equated with risk-taking – and even fear – as we faced many of the emotional challenges associated with various media. Art also meant developing our imaginations, of envisioning the possible. Art – with all its happy and unhappy ‘accidents’ – gave us a growing tolerance for uncertainty. But most of all, art gave us wings and the ability to express ourselves.

Nothing, however, could speak louder or more forcefully about the personal changes, insights, and inspirations that we all gained through meaningful relationships with the process of artistic expression than those products that we made, than the ways that we learned to ‘read’ and ‘write’.

### An example: working with Jon

Perhaps the power of this approach in terms of how it improves literacy can best be illustrated by looking at the man I have already referred to. Jon came into my English class with the attitude that he needed information and that I as the teacher should give him all the information he needed and tell him how to use it.

At 30, Jon had never picked up a paintbrush or worked with any artistic material after primary school because he always believed himself to be ‘un-artistic’ – especially in

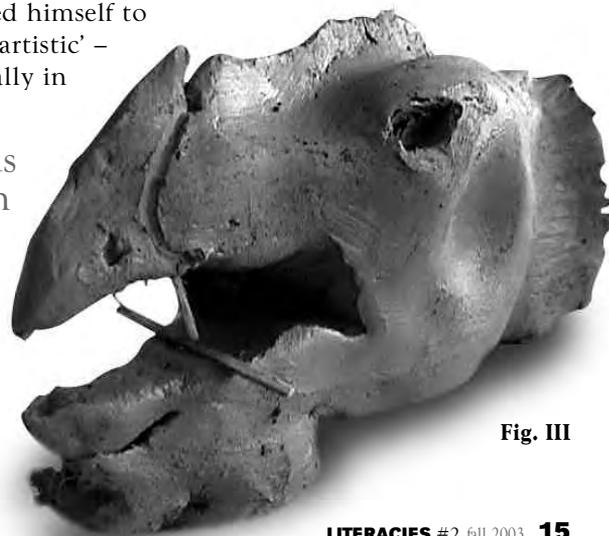


Fig. III

comparison with other students. He would deliberately spill paint or scribble in black on paper when asked to do anything artistic in elementary school, pointedly skipped those days he had art classes in high school, and absolutely refused to do anything remotely involved with art in the real world – including painting his own house. He was known as an ‘unco-operative’ student who couldn’t or wouldn’t write or read unless forced to – and dropped out of school vowing never to return: he was fourteen. Jon only came back to school when he realized he needed his diploma for a decent job. He resented the idea of this alternative class and said so loudly and often. I soon realized that he was a very articulate and thoughtful individual whose quips and public attitude were attempts to hide his discomfort at being such a weak student.

I instinctively turned to the arts as a possible way of providing opportunities for connection, and for listening and learning from each other and ourselves.

Although he balked at the idea of experimenting with pencil and paint, he borrowed my Polaroid camera as well as the digital camera to take pictures of a family outing. The resulting pictures were beautiful portraits in and of themselves and he was quite pleased with them. Refusing all help, he spent several hours trying to figure out how to use the computer word processing program to enlarge and modify each picture. He also set about quietly learning how to use the internet, slowly and painfully deciphering the complicated instructions to sign up for a free e-mail address so that he could e-mail the pictures to friends and relatives.

He created collage after collage to represent who he was and his likes and dislikes. Each was stronger and more pertinent than the previous ones (Figs I - II). He experimented with clay (Fig. III). He threw himself on paper placed on the floor and had a friend outline his body so that he could represent his whole self as a Canadian (Fig.IV). And finally, choosing pastels, he created a number of pictures, filled with color and movement. Shyly, he told me that they wouldn’t be complete without some written words. He was less reluctant to accept help, but just as determined to do it as much on his own as he could. He wrote the following poem to



Fig. II

accompany his pastel paintings of horses (Figs. V and VI):

*As the moon holds its sway over me  
my hooves beat a staccatoed crescendo  
in response to the power of the night.*

*Unbidden, and only partially aware,  
I know but one thing:  
I must run to that place  
my wild heart leads me...*

Then Jon began to write. He became interested in learning everything about Pablo Escobar, the infamous Colombian drug lord, and spent hours reading everything he could find about him on the internet and in old magazines and newspapers. His theory was that Escobar possessed those very same qualities that the business world lauded. The only difference, according to Jon, was that he used them in violent, illegal ways. He started to write the interview unit, deciding that Escobar would apply for a job as a CEO or a headhunter for a major corporation. He used information from his research to write up a resumé for Escobar, filling in any details he was missing as best he could. He conferenced with me many times regarding letters of employment and the type of formatting that he needed to use to write up a script for the interview. He amazed all of us.

During this time, other members of the class who were passively avoiding any creative attempts were watching. They saw the power of what Jon was doing and admired his attempts. Many of them later pointed to the beginning of Jon’s creative endeavors as the moment in time when they started believing they, too, could learn things.

Jon became a sought after collaborator. His newly found sense of himself as word crafter made him an excellent editor. When another student, Jag, was having difficulties finding words to explain his collage, Jon patiently sat with him and helped him to sort words until he came up with the following poem that pleased them both (Fig. VII):

**Once I was...**

Once I was  
 A Harley Davidson  
 Roaring, eager to be rode.  
 Now I am  
 a pile of nuts and bolts  
 waiting to be  
 a Honda Shadow.

By the end of the year Jon acknowledged that he was talented. He is now experimenting with different media and continuing to write.

The pieces shown here, like all the art products made in these classes, amply demonstrate the power and use of multi-modal representations as a possible means of further enhancing, expanding, and articulating ideas, thoughts and practices (Harris). As well, they lend credence to the theory that art can, indeed, encourage the growth of inner-dependence and the formation of 'interiority' (Greene 2001).

If I believed in the principles of self-directed lifelong learning, I would need to become truly more responsive to all the adults I work with.

**Significance of the experience**

It is important that we make connections between what and how we learn and what and how we teach. We know that when we teach – no matter what the subject matter may be – we actually teach what we value and love; therefore, in order to foster stronger readers and writers and more

thoughtful teachers and students,



Fig. VII

we educators need to value authentic experiences and ongoing self-reflection in ourselves and in others. I believe that we need to teach it when and how we can, and build it into the very foundations of our academic systems.

What I have discovered in my work with secondary students is that art in its many forms is a powerful tool for all those who choose to use it. If it can be used effectively by relatively weak academic secondary students to improve the way that they process reading and writing skills, then it is, indeed, a wonderful vehicle for authentic self-development and enhancing new understandings about teaching and learning. My own work with students indicates that arts-based techniques are capable of engaging even the most disaffected individuals. When students realize that they can create products that help them express themselves succinctly, their interest in learning expands and their confidence in themselves and in their own abilities grows. Their writing then becomes stronger and filled with their own distinctive voices and they develop a new appreciation of seeing, reading, connecting, and knowing. ■

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