Keynote Address
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1. Make Readers Make Art

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In creative workshops with children, I learned that literature is recycled material, a pretext for making more art. I also learned how close creative thinking is to criticism. These are embarrassingly basic lessons to be learning so late in life. My teacher was twenty-two-year-old Milagros Saldarriaga, cofounder of Lima’s Sarita Cartonera, an early publisher of cardboard books that replicated the work of Eloísa Cartonera of Buenos Aires.¹ As of this writing, of the more than sixty cartoneras that have followed Eloísa’s lead in Latin America and Africa, only Sarita Cartonera developed an interactive pedagogy to respond to a local challenge.² They had to. Lima didn’t read while Buenos Aires did. So, Sarita began to employ its charming products as prompts to recruit more readers. What better way to use books?

One of a kind covers announced the original material inside: new literature donated by Argentina’s best living writers. Ricardo Piglia and César Aira were among the first, soon followed by Mexican Margot Glanz; Chilean Diánela Eltit; and many others. By now, Harvard University’s Widener Library has more than two hundred titles from Eloísa Cartonera, and the University of Wisconsin, Madison, has more. Thanks to Wisconsin’s collection, Professor Luis Madureira did not despair in 2010 when he arrived to teach in Mozambique and found there were no books. Instead, he launched Kutsemba Cartão, with an impressive list of publications, book fairs, and reading groups.

Eloísa Cartonera didn’t set out to be the model for an entire continent and beyond, but her example proved irresistible.³ Rippling throughout Latin America before reaching Africa, the Cartonera project reached Harvard University in March 2007, invited by the “Cultural Agents” initiative for a week of talks and workshops.⁴ Javier Barilaro from Eloísa taught us how to make beautiful books from discarded materials, and Milagros from Sarita showed us how to use them in the classroom. This was a moment of truth for me and the other teachers. All of us crouched on the floor to cut the cardboard, and hunched over tables covered in scraps, tempera paints, scissors, string, and all kinds of decorative junk. Until then, the Cultural Agents initiative was drawn outward, working with impressive top-down and bottom-up art projects that humanistic interpretation had neglected. We convened, and continue to convene, conferences, courses, and seminars on thinkers who inspire other
cultural agents of change, and on a broad range of artists who identify their work as interventions in public life.

We represented other people’s work, taking note for the benefit of colleagues, students, and artists. Then—without anticipating it, but charmed and shamed by the work of two undergraduate maestros at Harvard College—I made a move toward more direct participation. In 2006, Amar Bakshi and Proud Dzambukira had gone to Mussoorie, a small town in India where Amar’s mother was raised and where girls are expected to drop out of school by age nine. Determined to raise expectations and to increase opportunities for more fulfilling futures, the two young men established a nongovernmental organization that hired local artists to offer after-school workshops. If the girls wanted to make art they had to stay in school. The almost immediate and sustained success of “Aina Arts” in India justified expanding the project to Proud’s native Zimbabwe by the following year.5

Keeping children in school by brokering art lessons was the kind of cultural agency I could manage. This was a wake-up call to direct action. I understood that agency doesn’t require genius or depend on particular professions. It can be a part of modest but mindful lives, my own for example. I am a teacher, after all, and the work of education is urgent almost everywhere, including my university-rich area where poor neighborhood public schools face escalating drop-out rates and increasing violence.

So, I developed a course called “Youth Arts for Social Change” with Boston’s Leadership Institute for after-school instructors.6 The course became a regular offering at Harvard’s Extension School, engaging local dancers, musicians, painters, actors, photographers, and others, to train teachers in creative techniques for any type of classroom.7 This was to be my culminating effort as a cultural agent, appropriating lessons I had learned from resourceful undergraduates, from seminars, conferences, and artists’ workshops. We would bring art back into schools as the motor and medium for engaged learning.

However, the cartonera brought me farther when it returned me to literature. Following Sarita’s example, teaching literature through the arts became the adventure in literacy and citizenship that we call “Pre-Texts.” “Make up your mind,” some potential partners demand. “Is Pre-Texts a literacy program? Or is it arts education? Or maybe civic development?” The answer is yes to all the options because each depends on the others.8 Let me explain:

1. Literacy needs the critical and creative agility that art develops, and welcomes interpretation from many readers to achieve depth and breadth.

2. Making art derives inspiration from critical readings of social issues and improves with contributions from informants, colleagues in different disciplines, and public responses.
3. Citizenship thrives on the capacity to read thoughtfully and creatively, with coartists whom we learn to admire.

Tolerance is lame by comparison; it counts on one’s own opinions while waiting for others to stop talking. Pre-Texts is a hothouse for interpersonal admiration, as a single piece of literature yields a variety of interpretations richer than any one response can be. This integrated approach to literacy, art, and civics develops personal faculties and a collective disposition for democratic life.

Literacy should be on everyone’s agenda because lack of it continues to be a reliable indicator for levels of poverty, violence, and disease, and because proficiency is alarmingly low in underserved areas worldwide. Skeptics will question the cause for alarm, alleging that communication increasingly depends on audiovisual stimuli, especially for poor and disenfranchised populations. They will even say that teaching classic literature reinforces social asymmetries because disadvantaged people lack the background that privileged classes can muster for reading difficult texts. Audiovisual stimuli, on the other hand, don’t discriminate between rich and poor and seem more inclusive.

Paulo Freire cautioned against this pedagogical populism, arguing that illiteracy precludes full citizenship. His advice in Teachers as Cultural Workers was to stress reading and writing in order to stimulate critical thinking and therefore to promote social inclusion. Freire traces a spiral from reading to thinking about what one reads, and then to writing a response to one’s thought, which requires more thinking, in order to read one’s response and achieve yet a deeper level of thought. Teachers democratize by raising the baseline of literacy to a higher common denominator, by not shunning literary sophistication along with elite works of art. The classics are valuable cultural capital and the language skills they require remain foundations for analytical thinking, resourcefulness, and psychosocial development. Without mastery of at least one spoken and written language, youth have little hope for self-realization. Paradoxically, skeptics reinforce the inequality they decry by dismissing our responsibility to foster high-level literacy for all.

Pre-Texts has partnered with boards of education, schools, and cultural centers, in Boston, Colombia, Puerto Rico, Mexico, Peru, El Salvador, Hong Kong, Zimbabwe, and Harvard’s Derek Bok Center for Teaching and Learning. Though developed for underserved schools, Pre-Texts’ approach is a natural for higher education, too. Research universities now recognize that art-making can raise the bar for academic achievement, and Pre-Texts makes good on that promise.

It has significantly improved my teaching at Harvard, for example. A new undergraduate course called “Pre-Textos” tackles tough texts by Jorge Luis Borges, Juan Rulfo, Julio Cortázar, Alejo Carpentier, and Octavio Paz, though
students still struggle with Spanish. For example, the pilot 2011 class made maps, choreographed dance pieces, composed music, created storyboards, acted, and remarked on the mutual admiration that making art generated on an intensely competitive campus. For a final project, the group decided to co-produce a film based on Jorge Luis Borges’s story, “Death and the Compass.” Each member contributed a talent for acting, directing, music, costumes, and/or photography, etc.; and all wrote accounts of their work as coartist with Borges.

In another example, my graduate course, “Foundational Fictions and Film,” offers a creative alternative to the standard essay assignment. Students are asked to compose one chapter of their own imaginary nineteenth-century national novel, and to write their reflections on the process. The quality of their new novel chapters and authors’ notes almost always surpasses their conventional essays, which hardly anyone elects to write in any event. Creating a novel demands sensitivity to character construction, registers of language, historical conflict, social dynamics, and intertextual references. Students will risk this “insider” appreciation of literature if teachers allow it.

Pre-Texts is an intentionally naughty name to signal that even the classics can provide material for manipulation. Books are not sacred objects; they are invitations to play. Conventional teaching has favored convergent and predictable answers as the first and sometimes only goal of education. This cautious approach privileges data retrieval or “lower-order thinking.” However, a first-things-first philosophy gets stuck in facts and stifles students. Bored early on, they don’t get past vocabulary and grammar lessons to reach understanding and interpretation. Teaching for testing has produced unhappy pressures on everyone. Administrators, teachers, students, and parents have generally surrendered to a perceived requirement to focus on facts. Unfortunately, with that focus, students rarely arrive at interpretive levels that develop the mental agility required today by new Common Core Standards for public education. Divergent and critical “higher-order thinking” has seemed like a luxury for struggling students.

However, when they begin from the heights of an artistic challenge, students access several levels of learning as functions of the creative process. Entering at the lower order seldom leads very far, but turning the order upside-down works wonderfully. Attention to detail follows from higher-order explorations, because creative thinking needs to master the elements at hand. A challenge to make something new of a text, drives even reluctant students to develop the understanding that leads to forming an interpretation, and therefore, to learning the vocabulary and grammar that had seemed bothersome or out of reach.

With Pre-Texts, I finally responded in good faith to my own proposal that we offer our best professional work as a social contribution, the way creative writers do when they donate writing to the cartoneras. Politics isn’t always a
pause from one’s field of expertise. For me, literary studies have become useful for civic development. This dialogue between scholarship and engagement, thinking and doing, is not a double bind, though the self-cancelling figure haunts the humanities like a hangover from heady days of deconstruction. With new dedication, I have adjusted the “Youth Arts” course to use literature as the entry point for reading lessons in various academic fields. Whatever art my colleagues and I facilitate or discipline we target, a creative text catalyzes interpretations, problem solving, research, and design. From the Extension School course, we have created a portable workshop that follows the model of Boal’s Forum Theater: an interactive approach that adjusts to local circumstances. As Boal did, we train facilitators in order to multiply cultural agents and sites for implementation. Complex academic and civic results follow from the simple Pre-Texts approach: 1. Take a text. 2. Spin it, using a range of available arts. 3. Reflect on what you did.

After writing, painting, dancing, acting, etc., participants sit in a Freirean circle to reflect, like Boal’s “spect-actors.” The question is always the same: What did we do? If you ask “what we learned,” you are likely to get unfriendly answers from teens. They sense that teachers want approval or praise and refuse to comply. If you ask instead what we did, students will want to justify their work or run the risk of looking foolish. One reflection follows another, in no set order, until everyone has spoken. After a few sessions, the dynamic of universal and brief participation feels natural and necessary. The first few interventions, however brilliant, will not exhaust possibilities. While we wait for more, and exercise critical thinking and patience with peers, intellectual and civic skills develop. New facilitators learn to expect original comments from one another and then from students. Participants also notice the democratizing effect of collective reflection; it levels the unevenness between forceful people and shy ones whose observations are worth waiting for.

**Off on a Tangent**

While participants deepen their readings of the same selected text during the series of their visual, literary, and performance interpretations, they also develop breadth by going “off on a tangent” each week. Choosing a tangential text that they can connect to the shared reading in any way—even if far-fetched—puts students in command and makes them read more widely. They peruse books, magazines, and the Internet, using their own criteria to select something they are proud to bring in. The combined dynamic, of inexhaustible interpretation of one text and the practically limitless reach of tangents, produces deep and broad readers.

Literature as recycled material; the concept had never occurred to me before. The cartonera book covers made of recycled cardboard became objective correlatives for the recycled material inside. This was my simple summary of Milagros’s practice, cutting through sophisticated literary criticism the way
that Javier cut through cardboard. When readers abstract literary functions from their practice of making things with literary prompts, a daunting vocabulary—such as intertextuality, traces, iteration, permutation, point of view, focalization, influence, and reader-response—becomes user-friendly. Such functions add up to a general principle, that literature is made up of reusable pieces, cuts, pastes, and pastiches.

During the Harvard Cartonera week, Milagros demonstrated the literary recycling process through a character portrait exercise that I detail below in the section, “Open Shop.” For now, I will just mention that she arranged us in pairs sitting back to back, while one person described a character from a story—Edgar Allen Poe’s “Man in the Crowd”—and the other sketched the description. After the first drawing, partners switched roles. When we taped the portraits onto the “gallery” wall, a visible interpretive diversity of each character demonstrated that each of us had combined the text with extraneous material from personal memories, preferences, and cultural baggage. We could not clearly distinguish between reading—which had seemed passive for some participants—and the active addition of sketched details. Where was the precise division between receiving and creating, understanding and imagining, reading and writing?

This lesson in deconstruction and reader-response theory was so effective and painless that I giggled out loud. It was positively fun, and I have repeated the activity many times with similarly profound and pleasurable results. When graduate students or colleagues play at this portrait-making, the fun heightens with reflections on the theoretical principles involved. One of my brightest graduate students celebrated Milagros’s inaugural workshop with relief: “I don’t hate narratology any more!” Theoretical terms don’t come up when we work with primary school children but, in all cases, the lessons are as clear as they are welcome: Each participant is the coauthor and authority of the work produced; interpretation exercises both critical and creative faculties; and the divergent but plausible interpretations stimulate admiration for everybody involved.

It seems obvious that books, plays, and poems are made up of words, motifs, plots, characters, grammatical structures, and elements that already exist in other contexts, and that authors borrow and recombine to produce arresting new works. Novelty is in the poaching and the recombination, not in the material which, logically, must already have been used if the new creation hopes to be understood. Wittgenstein wisely dismissed the possibility of private languages because they cannot communicate between one person and another.16 All language is borrowed or taken over, including the language of literary masters. Every reader of Don Quijote knows, for instance, that Cervantes played with chivalric and picaresque sources to write his masterpiece. However, his game of literary lifting goes even farther when he shamelessly “admits” to have picked up the whole manuscript, written by an Arab author, at a flea market. Similarly, Shakespeare is notoriously not the author of
his plots, but the genius rewriter of appropriated stories. To introduce students to writing through the liberties that great writers take, is to demystify the classics, and to invite young people to each try their own hand at altering texts with every new reading. Through artistic play, participants know that the classics of high culture and higher education are within their audacious reach.

The recycled nature of literature is hardly hidden, though we haven’t said it so simply. The simplicity can tickle students and teachers of literature while it levels higher-order understanding. Thanks to the jokes generated by Sarita’s pedagogy—about the fundamental accessibility of literary criticism and great literature lifting other people’s writing—playful sophistication can laugh at elitism. Anyone can enjoy the fun of writing as robbery. Teachers can therefore be more effective and inclusive when they invite students to take pleasure in a text.

Make Readers

Sarita Cartonera calls its literacy project LUMPA: Libros, un modelo para armar, or Books, a Model Kit, playing on a popular title by Julio Cortázar. LUMPA forms a loop between publishing and pedagogy, in which books become found material for creating endless variations. The program covers standard classroom concepts—author, plot, characters, themes—so that teachers meet required curricular objectives, as well as extend students’ learning beyond mere requirements. Instead of just summarizing a plot, students also distinguish it from a story by arranging and rearranging moments of the narrative. As they reassign the role of narrator to various characters of a story, they recognize that a narrator may be lying, which is a clever way to underline the nature of fiction. In teacher training workshops and then in classrooms, participants rewrite classics through alternative points of view, different times and places, and a range of literary genres, literally becoming authors as they master the vocabulary and techniques of a pre-text. These activities require both a lower-order focus on the found elements and higher-order interpretation.

From June through August 2007, Cultural Agents developed Sarita’s pedagogy into the multidisciplinary approach of Pre-Texts, by incorporating the experience of “Youth Arts,” in which we painted, danced, sang, sculpted, filmed, cooked, wrote, acted, and generally played with academic learning. Arts, after all, do more than “express” ideas or emotions; they explore materials and construct meanings. Northrop Frye famously quipped that it was unclear if art imitates nature, but very clear that it imitates other works of art. In our variations on Lima’s lessons, literature exploded with renewed energy every time a different artistic medium was used to interpret a selected text. Ablaze with art-making, even at-risk students hardly reckoned the difficulties they dealt with or the intense effort they expended. However, the sophistication they acquired was evident to everyone.

That first summer, thanks to support for a student trainer from David Edward’s course on creative entrepreneurship—“Idea Translation,”
Engineering Sciences 147, Harvard College—we launched three pilot programs in the Boston area. These took place at the Brazilian American Association (BRAMAS) in Framingham, the Boys and Girls Club in Chelsea, and Zumix, an extracurricular music center in East Boston. The lessons we taught and learned have become a portable program that counts on local artists and teachers to sustain it. Besides our practical experience and application, the Cultural Agents initiative brings nothing more to these programs than an iconoclastic approach to develop skills in critique and creativity.

A bit more detail about one activity may illustrate how Pre-Texts builds citizenship through lessons in literacy. Using the portraits by partners mentioned earlier, you are welcome to try it and all the exercises listed below.

When participants sketch the same character and see that each image is different from the rest, they sense that divergence is not a sign of error. This is a revelation for teachers who had assumed that only convergent answers are correct, one per question. During the reflection period, participants will identify each personalized interpretation and skill level as intervening factors. After the portraits are freshly hung in the “gallery,” and the “curator” initiates the exposition by inviting a pair of artists to talk about their collaboration, they are usually reluctant to note differences between the description and the sketch. When asked, “Is this the figure you had imagined while you were describing it to your partner?” first responses often deny or diminish divergence in a friendly effort to collaborate. Even after the facilitator probes an alleged convergence to reveal missed communication (“I meant really fat!”), and liberties taken (“Purple is my color”), participants prefer agreement. Invariably though, both artists will admit that their interpretations carry references to personal experiences or preferences, or perhaps an embarrassed confession about not drawing very well. With good humor, the facilitator, or “joker” in Boal’s vocabulary, can resignify a simple stick-figure as a work of “conceptual art.”

Only after the curatorial interviews recur, regarding several more portraits, does the group begin to anticipate divergences between the partners and enjoy each person’s particularity. When they recognize that variations are both plausible and pleasant, participants realize that “correct” answers multiply by the number of interpreters. They conclude with an appreciation for the uncommon genius of each contributor. Variety—even miscommunication and disagreement—enriches the experience of the text, so readers learn to admire peculiarities.

**Hip-Hop Signifies Close Reading**

Some of Pre-Texts’ best facilitators are unlikely teachers by conventional criteria. They are members of an Afro-Colombian hip-hop collective called The Ayara Family. When Cultural Agents trained local artists and librarians to be cofacilitators for a 2008 workshop of almost one hundred educators in Bogotá’s main library, the Ayaras emerged as star instructors. No one could
match the hip-hoppers as we manipulated metaphors and identified clever turns of phrase in Colombia’s classic and difficult national novel La vorágine. The Ayaras know that young people can turn the challenges of literary masters into dares among themselves, to outdo the masterpieces. Riffing on found material, or sampling, is the stock in trade of rap, which is a combination of rhythm and poetry. Also called “appropriation,” the combination of irreverence and homage to sources is the spirit of graffiti, urban choreography, musical mash-ups, and theatrical improvisation. These adventures in artistic displacement show the interpretive intelligence of hip-hoppers and recommend them as facilitators of critical thinking for other young people.

Experienced in violence prevention through the arts, the Ayaras also know that artistic ingenuity is a powerful antidote to conflict, because art honors nonconformist energies and channels it toward symbolic violence. Otherwise, covert hostility festers, aggressively. Aggression is natural in children and intense for teens. It is an energy that tests the environment, starting with the way children test their parents, to see if they are sturdy and don’t disappear. If parents pass the test, they merit a child’s love. This is Winnicott’s formulation for psychic development, advancing through play from hostility to affection.

Open Shop

In the Pre-Text workshop which I earlier promised to detail, the first moment was replete with the bustle of Cartonera publishers, as participants entered and engaged their eyes, hands, and brains in the tangible art of making a book. Sounds of high energy came from people cutting cardboard, choosing materials, and constructing covers to be decorated with markers, glitter, buttons, bottle caps, string, etc. Then, when designs were sufficiently advanced and attention was focused on manual details, the second phase began. A voice started to read the selected text out loud and the bustle quieted down. Everyone could hear the reading, even if the piece was difficult. The silence was a sign that people were listening; another sign was the frequent request to hear the piece again. This scene simulated another popular practice from Latin America: the lector or reader in tobacco factories, a tradition that is still alive in Cuba, but barely. Therefore, our intentional throwback to an earlier period revives challenging literature as an object of collective desire, and as a foundation for social interaction.

Readers in tobacco factories were celebrated throughout the Spanish Caribbean during the nineteenth century and at least half of the twentieth. The practice rippled into workshops of other cigar centers such as Tampa and New York City. The cigar factory was a kind of popular university for tobacco rollers. Their silent and skilled work in shaping tobacco into expensive cigars, produced great value and therefore gave these workers significant power to negotiate with factory owners, who could not easily replace them. One standard and nonnegotiable demand was that cigar rollers be allowed to hire a
professional reader and to select the reading materials. As they listened to and later discussed the readings, all the workers, literate but mostly illiterate, would engage with both classic and cutting-edge literature, including fiction, newspapers, novels, and sometimes incendiary political treatises. Here is Jesús Colón’s memoir of a factory in Cayey, Puerto Rico:

There were about one hundred and fifty cigarmakers, each one sitting in front of tables that looked like old-fashioned rolltop desks, covered with all kinds of tobacco leaves. The cigarmakers with their heads bent over their work listened intently. In the vast hall of the factory, I looked for the source of the voice to which they were listening. There was a man sitting on a chair on a platform.…He was called “El Lector”—the Reader. His job was to read to the cigarmakers while they were rolling cigars. The workers paid fifteen to twenty-five cents per week each to the reader. In the morning, the reader used to read the daily paper and some working class weeklies or monthlies that were published or received from abroad. In the afternoon he would read from a novel by Zola, Balzac, Hugo, or from a book by Kropotkin, Malatesta or Karl Marx. Famous speeches like Castelar’s or Spanish classical novels like Cervantes’ *Don Quixote* were also read aloud by “El Lector.”

Before Pre-Texts facilitators began their readings, they prompted participants to think of a question as they listened, the way children ask questions of a story that they hear. In conventional classrooms, teachers ask students about details or themes of a text to see if the class listened and understood. This can bore or offend a student who may wonder, as I used to, if the teacher thinks he or she is stupid or needs help to understand the story.

However, here the student participants were invited to demand more than they got. As authorities and interrogators, each participant speculated about missing details, motivations, background, etc., and framed an exploration of some interpretive tangent. After hearing everyone’s question, the next move was to choose one and write a possible explanation or imaginative development of the text. Then the intertexts were hung on a *cordel* or string, for instant publication in this third moment of activity. Each author then read the contributions of others and marveled at the range of responses. As they did in this workshop, people often take pains to write beautifully, or at least legibly, to welcome passersby.

Pre-Texts works in schools, after-school programs, summer programs, and outside of school with young people at all levels, from kindergarten to graduate studies. The most significant benefit of Pre-Texts is surely to stimulate literacy and higher-order, interpretive thinking. However, the corollary effects of freethinking, imaginative alterations, and admiration for the work of others, are significant contributions toward civic development. Consider the history of social and political effects from reading literature, philosophy, history, and the news among cigar rollers. Well-informed and deliberative, whether or not they could read themselves, tobacco workers were largely responsible for José
Martí’s otherwise unlikely success in organizing a cross class alliance for the Cuban War of Independence. Cigar rollers were also the first movers of organized labor in the United States, in good part because Cuban and Puerto Rican immigrants brought lectores with them to US tobacco factories. We sometimes forget that Samuel Gompers, a founder of the American Federation of Labor and its president from 1886 until his death in 1924, was first the leader of the Cigar Makers International Union and worked closely with Caribbean colleagues.

Today’s “readers” and facilitators for Pre-Texts invite young people to interpret and to deliberate, as the lectores did in tobacco factories. Using the creative arts identifies appropriation as a social resource. Civic participation depends on creativity, an aesthetic knack for reframing experience, and a corollary freedom to adjust laws and practices in light of constantly new challenges. Without art, citizenship would shrink to compliance, as if society were a closed text. Reading lessons would stop at the factual, “what is,” rather than continue to the speculative, “what if.”

Implementation

Pre-Texts is an approach, not a detailed recipe. Years ago, Freire warned us against prepackaged pedagogies that urge innovation and deliver exhaustive instructions. In his spirit, we train instructors to liberate their own creativity through variations on activities that we demonstrate, and new activities they propose. Youth leaders and artist-instructor collaborators need to “own” their particular version of the program in order to model independence and good humor about mistakes. Learning from participants, we keep adjusting activities and experimenting with new ones.

Ideally, training workshops last for a week. The formula—to spin a difficult text through an artistic practice and then reflect on what we did—is simple enough to learn in one session. The next four sessions provide practice in appropriation as each participant takes a turn to facilitate an artistic activity based on the same “pre-text.” We train teachers and local artists together so that they learn from one another, and overcome possible assumptions about a lack of creativity on one side and a lack of seriousness on the other. During the implementation with children and youth, Pre-Texts generally meets twice a week, usually for ten to twelve weeks. These training sessions are facilitated by a classroom teacher or a counselor, in collaboration with artists who rotate through the classrooms to bring both technical expertise and variety to each group. If resources are limited, teachers themselves can pool their talents to vary the arts employed in class. This arrangement satisfies the principle of artistic variety and exposes the students to several adult mentors without incurring the costs and administrative complexity of hiring another team of artists.

The compelling reason to work with a variety of arts is to make good on the principle of “multiple intelligences,” coined by Howard Gardner, to
develop each participant through a range of talents. Once a young person is acknowledged as someone who can paint, rap, dance, or act, etc., he or she gains the recognition and self-esteem that encourages taking risks in other arts. Healthy risk taking in art is a step toward interpretive reading and writing, critical thinking, persuasion, and deliberation.

Play With Me

Young people love to learn but hate to be taught. They learn best through guided play. I am convinced, along with Winnicott, that this is true for adults, too, because play doesn’t stop for human beings of any age. Learning through creative play is not new to education. Over a century ago, in an early version of today’s special education, Maria Montessori pioneered an arts-based, project-centered pedagogy that educated poor and intellectually limited children in Italy. It went so well that, without teaching for testing, they scored above average grades in national standardized exams. Like later reformers, including Brazilian Paulo Freire, French Jacques Rancière, and North American “rogue” teachers such as Albert Cullum, Montessori’s guiding principle was respect for the self-educating capacity of students. “The task of the teacher becomes that of preparing a series of motives of cultural activity, and then refraining from obtrusive interference.” Sequels to her approach, or parallel projects, such as the Waldorf Schools and the Reggio Emilia project in early childhood education, confirm the evidence of superior results through arts-based education. Engaging children in creativity demonstrably enhances their disposition to learn a range of intellectual and social skills by cultivating concentration and discipline through pleasurable, even passionate, practices. Yet, Montessori and Waldorf schools now serve privileged classes rather than public classrooms. Cynics aren’t surprised; they figure that the real mission of public schools is to train obedience, not to educate in taking initiative. Poor districts, overcrowded classrooms, and deflated expectations all conspire against poor children’s creative explorations.

To compound the problem, beleaguered teachers, under pressure to produce passing grades on standardized tests, suppose that engaging in artistic play is a distraction from academic work. As in Montessori’s Italy and Freire’s Brazil, the United States and many other nations need to address the poverty of imagination in underprivileged schools that resentfully submit to standardized testing and remain risk-averse. South Korea and Finland have dramatically improved their ratings through arts integration.

Pre-Texts recovers some lessons in creative learning, not only from modern educators, but also from Renaissance masters such as Leonardo Bruni who taught that great writers are our best teachers. “Read only those books written by the best and most esteemed authors of the Latin language, and avoid works which are written poorly and without distinction, as if we were fleeing from a kind of ruin and destruction of our natural talents.” Secular classics offered
and continue to offer tool kits of useful vocabulary, clever grammatical turns, and a knack for literary figures. Today’s classics include modern and contemporary works. Along with passages from Aeschylus and Virgil, Pre-Texts has used pages by Jorge Luis Borges, Gabriel García Márquez, Toni Morrison, Ray Bradbury, Maxine Hong Kingston, Víctor Hernández Cruz, Rabindranath Tagore, Octavio Paz, James Baldwin, Ralph Ellison, Mayra Santos Febres, and Julio Cortázar, among other masters.

As cocreators and connoisseurs-in-training, students exercise their critical faculties. They borrow elements from the classics for their own writing, learning to admire the found text as rich material for variations. They treat texts as raw material for improvising plots, constructing characters, or changing the register of language. The challenge to change a text leads young readers to use their analytic capacities in explorations of the original text so that they can propose a personal twist. Critical readers learn to mine the classics for lexical, grammatical, and structural elements. Texts become palpable for young iconoclasts who reappropriate with creative purpose, demystifying literature into usable material that can be appropriated. There is no need to select “relevant” reading materials and thereby to limit literary exposure, because youths can authorize themselves to make any text relevant through their own irreverent versions. Young creators develop mastery of a text by refusing its ultimate authority.

NOTES


2. Kutsemba Cartao in Mozambique is a recent ripple, after Luis Madureira from the University of Wisconsin, Madison went to teach there and found a need for books. See http://kutsemba.wordpress.com/.


4. See http://www.fas.harvard.edu/~cultagen/.


6. Gil Noam of the Harvard Medical School and Daishon Mills of Boston Public Schools both direct the Leadership Institute, associated with the Program in Education, Afterschool & Resiliency (PEAR).


9. See Oxfam International’s “Education: Tackling the Global Crisis” (briefing paper, April 2001) 2: “Today 125 million children do not get any formal education at all; the majority of them are girls. Even more children do not get sufficient schooling because they drop out before they learn basic literacy skills. Children throughout the world are being denied their fundamental right to education. In developing countries, one in four adults—some 900 million people, are illiterate. The human costs of this education crisis are incalculable.” http://www.oxfamamerica.org/files/OA-Education_Tackling_Global_Crisis.pdf.
11. See http://pre-texts.org/.
14. See “Evaluation of Amparo Cartoonera” by Liz Gruenfeld, 18: “Museo Amparo Program students were positively impacted in terms of attention to detail, reading comprehension, and student interpretation of stories, as seen by teachers and artists: ‘Students place more attention in details now. As with the “hypertexts,” they pay more attention to details in the story to be able to reverse the order of events and say what else might happen instead.’ Another teacher added that program students learned more words, resulting in a richer vocabulary.”
15. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *An Aesthetic Education in the Era of Globalization* (Cambridge, MA; Harvard University Press, 2012). Alongside the familiar Spivak of old is a contemporary Spivak, who offers a pressing sense of an ongoing dilemma that has only grown increasingly urgent and which she cannot quite resolve even as she articulates it: the double bind that marks the difference between the writing of books to be published for the academy, and the teaching of a global citizenry who take their learning beyond the classroom. For Spivak, the abstraction of philosophy is always as pragmatic an activity as protesting the intellectual property rights of the indigenous, but it is only in thinking about the idea of teaching itself that she reconciles that which has its “place in an essay prepared for the impatience of publisher’s deadlines” and that which takes “its place outside my classroom here.”
17. See http://proyectolumpa.blogspot.com/.
21. Michael Voss, “Reading While Rolling Cuba’s Famous Cigars,” BBC Thursday, December 10, 2009. http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/americas/8406641.stm. “Instead of canned music, many cigar factories in Cuba still rely on the ancient tradition of employing a reader to help workers pass away the day. Gricel Valdes-Lombillo, a matronly former school teacher, has been this factory’s official reader for the past 20 years. In the morning she goes through the state-run newspaper Granma cover to cover. Later in the day she returns to the platform to read a book. It’s a job Gricel Valdes-Lombillo claims she has never tired of. ‘I feel useful as a person, giving everyone a bit of knowledge and culture. The workers here see me as a counselor, a cultural adviser, and someone who knows about law, psychology and love.’ Once the newspaper reading is over workers have a say in what they would like to listen to. There’s a mix of material ranging from classics to modern novels, like the Da Vinci Code, as well as the occasional self-help books and magazines. On the day I visited the factory Gricel was reading Alexandre Dumas’ classic, the *Count of Monte Cristo*, a long-time favourite here.”


25. Gompers had a one-year hiatus in leadership from 1894–1895.


27. Freire, *Teachers as Cultural Workers*, 8.


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