

Shifting identities, literacy, and a/r/t/ography: Exploring an educational theatre company

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Abstract

This article explores an emerging educational theatre company in Vancouver, British Columbia by investigating how the creators embrace their multiple roles as artists, researchers, and teachers in their effort to promote literacy in schools. The authors begin by exploring notions of identity within an a/r/tographic framework. They then define their understanding and usage of a/r/tography—a practitioner-based methodology that emphasizes living inquiry and reflective practice. They conclude with a dramatized dialogue about the process of researching, creating, and producing two touring theatre shows about literacy for young children. Using a/r/tography as a methodology allowed the authors of this paper to observe and pay close attention to the research data while still honoring the creative process of making theatre.

Introduction

Each year schools from across North America welcome theatre companies to share their work with students. These companies are typically educational theatre companies and their work frequently exposes students to a variety of relevant issues for their target school-aged audiences (e.g., teen pregnancy, racism, bullying, dyslexia, body image). However, few theatre companies integrate literacy pedagogy (e.g., developing reading comprehension, teaching grammar, strengthening writing strategies) into their performance.

Although some studies have explored educational theatre companies that tour North American schools (Burke, 2004; Doolittle & Barnieh, 1979; Grady, 1999), the majority of the research looks at the outcomes of the work or how the play's themes affected the students, through student responses to the plays, or reviews of the productions. To our knowledge, few research studies have looked at the process of creating these pedagogy-based plays (Belliveau, 2004; Norris, 2000), particularly in regard to the creative decisions the theatre company explores while writing and performing the play. As drama and literacy researchers, we (the authors) would like to explore the following questions: What is the nature and impetus of pedagogy-based plays being authored? How do creators of such plays embrace their multiple roles as artists, researchers, teachers, and playwrights in their effort to promote literacy in schools? Seeing how playwrights and performers negotiate what it means to be an artist/researcher/teacher/playwright might inspire educators to re-imagine theatre performances as engaging pedagogical spaces where students generate and revise their own stories, conduct research, and feel like they are inside literature on a visceral level.¹ Arguably more research is needed in this area, especially in regard to the ways that educational touring theatre performances are created and how the company members situate themselves as they design, negotiate, produce, and disseminate texts.

To address this gap in the research, this article offers a behind-the-scenes-look at *The Tickle Trunk Players*—an emerging educational theatre company in Vancouver, British Columbia whose primary focus is promoting literacy in schools and communities (i.e., reading, writing, speaking, listening, viewing, representing). Using an a/r/tographic methodology and analytic framework we, the authors of this paper, offer a fresh perspective for thinking about literacy education. This methodology allows us to inquire about the ongoing and embodied process of art-making while also exploring the ways that creators assume multiple identities when they author. In this way the paper extends beyond the plays themselves and looks at the process of creating the work, including how the creators (i.e., Winters and Sherritt) act and re-act in relation to the communities that they are engaging with.

The article is divided into four sections. First, we offer an introduction to the company—its goals, its history, and examples of what the company does within educational communities. Second, identity is defined, suggesting that it is not singular or inherent, but rather that identity is dynamic and layered and that it is constantly being reconstructed within broader social

¹BC curriculum and prescribed learning outcomes are available at

http://www.bced.gov.bc.ca/irp/irp_ela.htm

frameworks. Third, a/r/tography—a practitioner-based methodology that emphasizes living inquiry, and reflective practice—is explored, including some of the key concepts it holds, and its relationship with the notion of multiple identities. And fourth, using dramatic dialogue as an a/r/tographic mode, the company co-founders explore the process of researching, creating, and producing two touring theatre shows about literacy for young children.

The Tickle Trunk Players – A lifetime of luggage

First you find something you know. Then you think where the story might go. Next you see what it all can be. Before you know it, you're a wizard like me. Oh yeah! Doing the CPV. Connect. . . predict. . . and then see it, CPV. Yeah! (Sherritt-Fleming & Winters, 2005, p.2)

Above are lyrics (Sherritt-Fleming, 2005) included in a children's play by the Tickle Trunk Players, entitled *The Meaning Maker* (Winters, 2005). This play, which has toured elementary schools and libraries across Vancouver, British Columbia and Calgary, Alberta, integrates artistic performance (writing, storytelling, music, and drama) and cognitive research on reading comprehension strategies (Anderson & Pearson, 1984; Duke & Pearson, 2002). Here, the Story Wizard sings advice to a young girl, helping her to make sense of stories. To date, The Tickle Trunk Players have produced five educational shows for elementary audiences: *The Meaning Maker* (2005), *Poetic License* (2005), *Sporty Shorts*, (2006), *Whatever I Write* (2007) and *I've Got Rhythm* (2007), all written by Lori Sherritt-Fleming and Kari-Lynn Winters. Each of these plays focuses on curriculum mandated by the province of British Columbia's Language Arts prescribed learning outcomes (e.g., reading strategically such as making personal connections to texts, making predictions, or asking questions; integrating a range of texts including poetry, myths, drama; developing and organizing stories with setting, characters, and plots; listening to and retelling stories). The Tickle Trunk Players was established to promote literacy—the multimodal ways that humans write and read, speak and listen, represent and view information—in age-appropriate and playful ways. Its website states the goals of the company:

[The Tickle Trunk Players] provide innovative, interactive and affordable theatre performances and workshops for pre-school and elementary audiences. Our aim is to educate as well as entertain! Our primary focus is literacy with dynamic shows that highlight specific learning outcomes (<http://tickletrunkplayers.com/about/>).

Winters and Sherritt, who have also been the principal playwrights and performers in these plays, have noted that after performances children often ask them, “Where did you get your ideas?” This is a complex question with a number of ways to respond. Perhaps the idea grew out of Winters' and Sherritt's undergraduate work in theatre/drama, when they attended university together; or, maybe it started when they co-taught drama and circus skills to children in after-school programs in 2002; or, to go further, it would also be true to say that the ideas they use for their plays grew out of a lifetime of luggage—languages, stories, poems, songs, toys, books, live(d) experiences, research or writing projects, teaching methods, and so on.

Although Winters and Sherritt have intuitively known that they are (in a small way) shaping and perhaps expanding the literacies of teachers and students—by offering multimodal

approaches to teaching and learning the curriculum (for instance using the theatrical technique called pop-up story to teach a cognitive comprehension strategy like connection), by integrating Canadian myths and literature with song, rhythms, and movement, and by interacting directly with students in an age-appropriate and entertaining way—they had not, until now, researched their own process.

Three research questions are suggested: How does a theatre company research its performances and its creative process in an authentic, living way? What identities are the creators assuming as they author? And how might these identities that the creators assume play a role in shaping both their authoring practices and the literacy pedagogies they are promoting?

Using an a/r/tographic methodological approach, this article explores how two shows (*The Meaning Maker* and *Poetic License*) came to be authored (e.g., designed, negotiated, produced, and disseminated by The Tickle Trunk Players). Particular to this investigation is how the artists assumed multiple identities in various social contexts, and how these identities helped to shape the Tickle Trunk Players' performances for literacy education.

Shifting Identities

We (the authors) used to think that identity was like an onion—it was about constantly uncovering the layers to get at that inherent core. However, this understanding of identity shifted, was elaborated upon, when we began to read research in the areas of identity and culture (Dyson, 1997; Gallagher, 2000; Holland, Skinner, Lachicotte, & Cain, 1998). These scholars, drawing on the theoretical contributions of Vygotsky (1978), highlight the ways that humans negotiate thought processes and mediate their actions through symbols. Vygotsky argued that humans first mediate their thoughts on a social level (interpsychologically) and then on an individual level (intrapsychologically). These readings on identity and culture helped us realize that drama is a form of “world-making” and that it has the potential to affect children’s construction identity (Cobb, 1977; Medina & Campano, 2006; O’Neill, 1995). We now acknowledge that identity is not something innate or uncovered, rather that identity is an interactive and continually re-constructed process. In other words, classrooms are not places where individual children find their own identity, but rather, classrooms themselves are shaped by the social cultural contexts that emerge and by the ways students create and negotiate multiple identities and positions.

This idea is highlighted in Holland et al. (1998) *Identity and Agency in Cultural Worlds*, where the authors suggest that identity is not housed inside of people, but rather that identity is continually re-constructed (or in their words—re-authored). They write:

The meaning that we make of ourselves is, in Bakhtin’s terms, “authoring the self,” and the site at which this authoring occurs is a space defined by the interrelationship of differentiated “vocal” perspectives on the social world....The self is a position from which meaning is made, a position that is “addressed” by and “answers” other and the world (the physical and cultural environment) (p.173).

Here, drawing on Bakhtin (1999), these authors argue that identity is always “dialogic”—relational, multiple and ongoing—and that within sociocultural environments identities are re-made.

Additionally, Davies and Harre (1990) suggest that within each imagined identity, people also constitute different imagined positions relative to their sense of place, their sense of agency, and between the storylines of others who are inside the sociocultural contexts. For example, in a conversation with a student, George may construct himself as a drama teacher and at the same time he may position himself within this identity as a storyteller (e.g., “Let me tell you about a similar experience I had”), as an actor (e.g., “Play opposite me in this scene: if I say _____, you would reply _____”), as a guide (e.g., “I’ll model this idea, then you give it a try”), as a director (e.g., “Perhaps you could raise your voice here to show your heightened emotion”), and so on. It is important to consider how these identities situate the people involved in literacy practices (both teachers and students), since learning occurs in relation to our social circumstances (Davies & Harre, 1990). In other words, a teacher’s constructed identities—the ways he or she positions himself in the classroom or is positioned by others, or the ways he or she interacts with students, and so forth—all play into how meaning is negotiated within that situated context. Thinking critically about the possible discursive positions within each identity not only has the potential to extend learning (as people encounter students and texts from different points of view—as a teacher, a novice, an artist, and so forth), but it also encourages empathy for others involved in the social context, offering opportunities for teachers and students to look both inside themselves (individual thoughts) and outside themselves (social relations) at the same time.

Defining A/r/tography

In most cases, research activity in schools, or in relation to schools, is temporally defined and executed. Researchers negotiate a period of time and a problem or a phenomenon to research, with outcomes based on the analysis of findings during the period of research....Reflective practice on the other hand, is a way of life; it is not bounded in the same way as outsider models of research. It refers to the nurturing and development of life-long dispositions and the on-going and continuous self-inquiry into one’s own professional practice. (Neelands, 2006, p. 16-17)

In the above quotation, drama researcher Jonathon Neelands compares two diverse forms of educational research, specifically those that offer an “outsider’s approach” (i.e., the researcher observes a participant or a group of participants over a period of time to gain understandings of phenomenon or problems), to those that suggest an “insider’s approach” (i.e., the researcher is a participant in the group who continually explores and questions his or her own processes or phenomenon). It is the interwoven combination of both these approaches that is one of the founding premises of a/r/tography—an ongoing inquiry-based methodology that focuses on the investigator’s reflective, in between process.

In this emerging arts-based research methodology (a/r/tography), the investigator’s identity is in constant fluctuation. In other words, the a/r/tographer not only moves between the identities of artist, researcher, teacher, and writer, she also continually shifts positions within the social context (e.g., action researcher/researcher as observer, teacher as guide/teacher as facilitator, artist/art critic). Kari may, for example, construct an identity as a researcher and position herself as an outsider. Here, she becomes an active listener or observer of the participants in the study. Yet, this is not all that the a/r/tographer is or will be. She may also

identify herself as a teacher, positioned as an insider. Here Kari may model the learning that is being questioned, while also encountering the narratives and dialogues, as a writer or a researcher. Then, stepping back and assuming an outsider teaching position, she may answer questions from her students or facilitate their learning by suggesting a follow-up activity. When she views a problem she may shift her positioning again, perhaps becoming the artist who furthers the meaning of the learning, and so forth. This example demonstrates that there is no one identity or position the a/r/tographer can hold onto indefinitely. Pearse (2004) posits that a/r/tography is about the complex interwoven construction of multiple identities, voices, positions, and journeys within a multiplicity of marginal spaces and social contexts. This suggests that identity positions are always shifting, transforming, re-creating, and re-organizing themselves.

Describing Key A/r/tographic Concepts

In-between spaces

In the above section a/r/tography is described in spatial ways—specifically the concept of insider and outsider approaches to research are explored. In addition to moving between these spaces, it is important in this methodology to consider how the a/r/tographer also continually moves between four particular identities: the artist, the researcher, the teacher, and the writer.

Rather than comparing identities (e.g., artist vs. teacher) or creating dualities (e.g., insider vs. outsider), the a/r/tographer is interested in the interstitial spaces of knowing that lie between, the spaces amidst outsider/insider or artist, researcher, teacher, and writer. All of these are inherent, although not always as visible in the a/r/tographic process. To explain this idea, it is useful to suggest the notion of a collage. A collage is a combination of different pieces (i.e., paper, cloth, photographs, and so on) layered together in such a way that its composition represents meaning to its creator and the audience. As the collage is built upward and outward, more pieces are layered and more meaningful insights are offered. But at the same time, particular traces of thought or representations also get covered. This doesn't mean that those covered traces are non-existent, only that they lie in spaces that are in-between and are less obvious.

It is the a/r/tographer's responsibility to delve in, investigate, and expand these marginal in-between spaces and "enlarge the space of the possible" in order to create opportunities for new visions and insights around culture and world-making (Sumara & Davis, 1997, p. 310). Although Sumara and Davis are talking specifically about educational action-research, the premise we are exploring is similar. A/r/tography is also about authenticity, researcher involvement, practitioner inquiry, and about "research that makes culture" (p. 309). This is one of the inherent goals of the Tickle Trunk Shows, specifically to enlarge the space of the possible. For instance, Winters and Sherritt often ask students to delve deeper into children's literature. In one of their shows, *Whatever I write*—about a boy who tries to overcome writer's block²—Winters and Sherritt not only ask students for their suggestions about the book, they also incorporate students' ideas into the Tickle Trunk performance, acting these suggestions out, demonstrating how the students' ideas might play out in different contexts, and so forth. Here,

² This play is based on Winters' award-winning book *Jeffrey and Sloth* (2007).

they attempt to investigate these marginal in-between spaces; using renderings of drama and imagination, they reflect and re-write the book, exposing new underpinnings of potential meaning.

The a/r/tographer, for example, may open up the space between teaching and researching. And using art, drama, and/or movement as a possible pathway she may reflect on her own teaching practice, or explore, interrogate, or expand a particular language arts idea or pedagogical phenomenon (e.g., in different shows they draw upon patterns of language, sentence fluency, or conventions of writing). However, the a/r/tographer doesn't remain in this one space. She may then move to explore other spaces such as those that lie between art-making and research, art-making and teaching, writing and teaching, and so on. With each new exploration of in-between spaces, she is given new insights and encouraged to re-organize her identity again and again.

Multiple Positions

At different points throughout the process, the a/r/tographer may align herself more closely with one or more of these identities. For example, when Kari and Lori are presenting a drama/literacy workshop to a class of students, although they give thought to be artful in the presentation they have created and closely consider what they are researching or learning from the process, this moment is mostly informed by the teaching identity—how the learners are engaging and coming to know in that particular context. At other times, even within that same workshop, they may focus on being performing artists, as researchers, or as writers. This is not to say that the skilled a/r/tographer cannot also layer all four of these identities together in mutual and interwoven ways.

As suggested in the prior section of this paper, in addition to shifts in identity, it is also possible to position oneself inside a constructed identity. Davies and Harre (1990) discuss this idea of positioning:

Once having taken up a particular position as one's own, a person inevitably sees the world from the vantage point of that position and in terms of the particular images, metaphors, story lines and concepts which are relevant within the particular discursive practice in which they are positioned. (p. 40)

Shifts in positions are always fluid and sometimes overlapping. For example, drama can be both within and outside the individual at the same time; when performing with others, one can position oneself as an actor/spectator, an actor/director, an actor/critic, and so forth. On some occasions, these positions are employed simultaneously. For example, Kari or Lori may act in a scene with others and then reflect on it later as critics. At other times these positions are more simultaneous. For instance, we can be actors and spectators at the same time (e.g., see Boal, 1985); we both witness and embody the narratives that surround and live within us.

Springgay and Irwin (2007), and others (e.g., Bakhtin, 1999; Sumara, 2002) suggest that identity is continually constituted and negotiated through lived encounters with others. So with each new position, the learner gains more understandings and insights about her own identity as well as about the contexts that place her within that particular identity.

With each new vantage point, the a/r/tographer gains
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The possible positions are infinite; the process of constructing meaning from each possible vantage point is continually ongoing and generative.

The Ongoing Process

In a/r/tography, process matters. This is because meaning is alive—always moving, always growing. A/r/tographers view constructions of knowledge as infinite and in-process. There is always another identity to construct, another position to explore.

This is not to say that there ----- are ---- not----- interruptions----- or ----resting places.

Certainly, these reflective spaces are necessary for a/r/tography and other research methodologies. These resting spaces give learners opportunities to re-organize what they know. However, these rests are never finite; there are no absolute endings, and similarly, no absolute beginnings.

Bakhtin (1999) suggests that one can only reflect for so long before the dialogue and the search for understanding begins again. “The work is a link in the chain of a speech communication” (p. 126). For every utterance is preceded and then followed by an infinite number of linked utterances: we are in a constant dialogue with one another. So even when one person relinquishes an utterance, at some point another speaker will take the floor, continuing the conversation and dispersing new knowledge.

In some research methodologies, hypotheses are made, answers are uncovered, and data are recorded. All the while, the researcher, who holds ultimate authority on the subject, details the direction of the study. A/r/tography differs from these methodologies; here, data are layered and interwoven in complex and original ways so that questions and answers inform each other; data are constructed, interrupted, de-constructed, and re-constructed.

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A/r/tography is an inquiry-based methodology that is full of multiple layers and particular intricacies. It is not about completing a static piece of art, framing it, and appreciating the product from afar. Quite the opposite actually—it is about folding back the layers of the assemblage, asking questions, being a part of and embracing the process, and investigating the spaces (in)between. This methodology allows us to examine the nature and impetus of the work the Tickle Trunk Players are authoring, by looking at both the rehearsal process and the productions. A/r/tography provides a framework that emphasizes the inquiry process, particularly the weaving of the artistic and pedagogical. By using this framework the authors of this paper were able to focus on the multiple positions of the artist-creators and audience members. Specifically, the a/r/tographic investigation allowed the authors to probe into the in-between and inner spaces of theatre-in-education creation, and the ongoing process of touring theatre (including how rehearsals and productions inform one another). Paying attention to the details of this authorship resonates with the Tickle Trunk Players' philosophy, which is to break down the fourth wall, consider the process of authorship, and provide spaces of pedagogy and engagement.

A Dramatized Dialogue between Two A/r/tographers: Creating The Meaning Maker and Poetic License.

In the past, theatrical and dramatic modes of representation have been researched through different qualitative methodologies including: action research (Wilhelm, 1997); reflective practice (Neelands, 2006; Taylor, 1996); ethnodrama (Belliveau, 2006; Saldana, 2005); narrative inquiry (Zatzman, 2003); ethnography (Gallagher, 2007, 2000). At this point in time however, few have used a/r/tography as a lens for exploring theatre in education (Beare & Belliveau, 2008). In this next section, using a/r/tography as the theoretical framework, Kari and Lori share a dramatized dialogue, offering how the Tickle Trunk Players and their touring theatrical productions of *The Meaning Maker* and *Poetic License* came to be. This section is particularly interested in investigating the shifts amidst/between artist, researcher, teacher, and writer, as well as the multiple positions within each identity.

Scene 1

K & L (enter opposite sides of the stage, singing):

We're the Tickle Trunk Players and we are here for a show. So let's get started, come on let's go. Clap, clap. Let's go! Clap, clap. Let's go.

Scene 2

(L crosses to SR and begins throwing imaginary things to K [notebooks, a photo album, a sketch book, a diary, tapes, etc.] K takes the items DSL and packs them into a pretend suitcase.)

L: Geez Kari, got enough stuff?

K: It's all stuff I need Lori. You need a lot of stuff when you go to graduate school.

L: I see that. I'll start packing the car, but it may take two trips.

(L exits)

K: Throughout my life I have always been a collector, saving traces of my life that resonate (stories, toys, doodles, photographs, books, diaries, songs, etc.). These traces of ideas, conversations, strategies, and memories have been unconsciously packed into the

luggage I carry with me. Today as a graduate student and co-researcher in the Language and Literacy Department at the University of British Columbia, a teacher, and a published children's writer, I unpack collections of texts I travel with. I am curious to know how they have helped to form my identities as an artist, researcher, teacher, and writer—how my past has brought me to be a writer, educator, and performer for The Tickle Trunk Players.

(L pretends to pack car.)

L: I'm a collector too. I'm also a world traveler, a listener, a teller of stories and a recorder of personal histories. I work with communities of residents, students, teachers and artists to create communion and celebration around the experiences that connect us. As an educator I help people to discover and document their voices, as an artist I write and perform them, as a researcher I ask questions and seek to fill spaces that have not yet elevated the sound of the human spirit from a whisper to a song. Kari and I created the Tickle Trunk Players to integrate all of these passions so we can educate, entertain, write, research and celebrate our stories on the stage.

K: I began writing for the Tickle Trunk Players by starting with something I knew. As an elementary teacher, I had taken classes in reading research and understood how these theories could be applied in the classroom. For example, I had read about schema theory—how humans organize and construct meanings in their heads (Anderson & Pearson, 1984) and had experienced classrooms where children were asked to activate their background knowledge and merge it to the texts they read (Tierney & Cunningham, 1984). These understandings were extended and sometimes disrupted during my M.A. thesis—Developing an Arts-Integrated Reading Comprehension Program for Less Proficient Intermediate Students (Winters, 2004). Here, I came to know more about other literacy and semiotic theories like transactional theory (Rosenblatt, 1978), multiliteracies pedagogy (New London Group, 2000), multi-modal discourse theories (e.g., Baldry & Thibault, 2006; Jewitt & Kress, 2003; Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2001), and post-structural theories (e.g., Davies & Harre, 1990; Sumara, 1998). I was learning how the field of literacy was bigger than I originally envisioned, and that some of the theories were not commensurable. How do I make sense of cognitive strategies that seem to continue to be implemented in British Columbian schools ... in relation to post-structuralist ideas that I was learning about in university? For example, when I considered the idea of connection—the students' background knowledge and their relationships to a text.³ In regard to teaching reading comprehension the question for me becomes, "How do I get students to bring their experience to the text?" And, from a post-structuralist perspective I ask, "If students have more than one experience they bring to the text—which experiences should they choose? In which contexts? And, how are their changing

³ A specific connection example would include if these children have seen a wolf at the zoo and they have heard about the wolf in the Little Red Riding Hood fairytale, perhaps they can bring these experiences to the Tickle Trunk Players' performance in order to relate to the Story Wiz who talks about wolves.

discourses informing the situation?” Indeed, my experiences in and beyond the classroom continued to shape my thinking—even those theories in discord. So I drew upon cognitive strategies such as connection, prediction, visualizing, summarizing, and so forth while I was writing the play and teaching because these were the terms that the Vancouver School Board was emphasizing, and yet I still thought about post-structuralist notions as I thought about myself as a researcher or as an artist. For example, I imagined myself in different positions in relation to the audience (as their guide who leads the way, as their antagonist who riles them up and forces them to respond, as their teacher who informs) and in how I was using the embodied discourses of theatre (as a communicative tool, a way to reach and engage the students) and how the discourses were shaping me too (letting me think in more flexible and creative ways by mediating through gesture, voice work, and the space I could move within).

L: My background is in theatre, educational programming and performance. I had toured with several educational theatre troupes, including Performers For Literacy who combined improvisation and storytelling to inspire a love of reading in young audiences. I developed arts-based programs to create connections between imagination and text. When Performers For Literacy folded here on the West Coast, I wanted to continue where they had left off...but how, with whom, with what shows and resources and for what purpose? The desire to fuse arts and education fuelled my teaching, writing and art-making. In the meantime, Kari was working on a project that provided a lot of the inspiration for what was to follow. Kari, what is the VSB Later Literacy Project?

K: The Later Literacy Project was another project that substantially influenced me, particularly how I thought about literacy assessment and the ways that it was being taught in schools. This was a Vancouver district-wide project that supported a cognitive reading and writing approach among students in grades 4 to 8. I was hired by Dr. Theresa Rogers as a graduate research assistant on the three-year pilot project that included 13 schools. It was based on years of research on promoting comprehension strategies (c.f. Rogers, Winters, & Bryan, 2006). From the conception of the project I began asking where the research might lead me, especially in other areas of my life. Here, we were interested in students’ reading processes, specifically which strategies they were drawing upon to support their comprehension. One job I had during this project was writing the test passages for reading comprehension assessment.

L (as principal researcher, Dr. Rogers): What ideas will be explored as you write the passages?

K: I was thinking as a writer.

L (as Dr. Rogers): What grade level modifications will you make?

K: I was thinking as a teacher.

L (as Dr. Rogers): What evidence do you have?

K: I was thinking as a researcher.

L (as Dr. Rogers): How will you breathe life into these non-fiction passages?

K: I was thinking as an artist too.

Scene 3

L: In my own life, I was also pulling threads of ideas together. At that time I wanted to create a new theatre company and it seemed both Kari and myself were shifting identities between being artists, teachers, researchers and writers in the broadest sense. Both of us had a passion for education, learning, imagination, and composing. Perhaps we could join together?

Kari, I am creating an educational theatre company called the Tickle Trunk Players and I would like you to join me.

K: Me? How?

L: As an actor. As a writer. A researcher and a teacher.

K: Call it serendipity. At that moment I realized that I could combine the luggage I had been carrying—I was already a teacher and a writer! I had just completed a large research project. I had written test passages and had recently gotten a children's picture book accepted. I could combine these identities with my master's research. Perhaps I could bring to bear my theatrical background and write a play—and maybe even perform in the shows?

Yes! I'd love to be part of it!

L: And with that yes, the Tickle Trunk Players was born!

K & L (*singing*):

We're the Tickle Trunk Players and we are here for a show. So let's get started, come on let's go. Clap, clap. Let's go! Clap, clap. Let's go.

K: We'll now share some excerpts from our shows, *The Meaning Maker* for grades K-3 and *Poetic License* for grades 4-7. This will shed light on the underlying process of creating the shows, specifically how we dramatized some of the strategies that the Vancouver School Board was implementing. We believe that seeing how we positioned ourselves as writers, artists, researchers and teachers during the process of creating the shows might inspire educators to re-image theatre performances as engaging pedagogical spaces where performers, teachers and students alike are given opportunities to get inside literature (Wilhelm, 1997), revise their own stories, conduct research, and perhaps re-make their own identities.

Scene 4

K: In this 45-minute interactive show, we follow Braidie as she learns to use reading strategies to overcome the Meaning Messer and to make meaning from stories.

L (as Braidie) and K (as the Story Wizard) (*singing*):

First you find something you know. Then you think where the story might go. Next you see what it all can be. Before you know it, you're a wizard like me. Oh yeah! Doing the CPV. Connect. . . predict. . . and then see it, CPV.

L : Connections!

Scene 5

K: I was beginning a journey of multiple connection-making. On one level, I was researching literacy theories and discourses. On another level, I was living my own research, and understanding the modes that I was using (e.g., Drama affords active engagement through language, movement, sound, visuals, and so forth.) And I was coming to know how my research informed my art-making and teaching identities.

(K puts on hat)

K (as the Story Wizard): *Here I'll show ya and I'll ask my story wranglers (he indicates to the audience) to help ya out. (SW asks for the audience's help). Right. Rightio. Now C means connectin'. (SW takes out two bungee cords and gives one end to Braidie. She connects them together. She places one end on his forehead, Braidie copies her action.) It's like these cords here. Right now we're connected...we share somethin' in common—we both are thinkin' why do we have these silly cords stuck to our foreheads? (Story Wizard laughs heartily). But seriously, makin' connections, that's when you...connect yer life to the story.*

L (as Braidie): *But how?*

K (as the Story Wizard): *Say for example, with this Little Red Ridin' Hoodie book. You be dressed in red and she be dressed in red. See...you've got somethin' in common. That's called connectin' (SW encourages audience actions).*

L (as Braidie): *Yes. We're both girls dressed in red.... I get it. Like Little Red Riding Hood has a grandma and so do I! (nods)*

K (as the Story Wizard): *That's right. That's called Connectin'.*

(L freezes)

L: Writing for an older audience was challenging. I engaged in research to find curricular material in *Poetic License* that was relevant to student learning. I first looked at Howard Gardner's theory of Multiple Intelligences (1993), then at the work on multiliteracies pedagogy (New London Group, 2000), and eventually Harvey and Goudvis' (2000) reading comprehension strategies that were being addressed in the Vancouver School Board's Later Literacy Project. Then I wrote my play, thinking about these theories. For example, while teaching Harvey and Goudvis's ideas about comprehension strategy instruction in contexts and Garner's multiple intelligences, I invited students to sing and clap along with the CD as they thought about visualizing *The Flying Canoe*. This addressed the musical learners and still taught strategic reading.

As an educator with Learning through the Arts (<http://www.ltta.ca/>), I had the opportunity to teach in grade 6/7 classrooms—developing a unit on geometry through performance poetry. Students connected with the hip hop kinds of rhythms used in pop culture. So, I thought maybe if I used this format to frame a play, students would be educated, engaged and entertained all at once. I created a plot where Meghan and Claire endeavour to create a piece of living literature (including hip hop) to present at their school's Literary Café.

As an artist, I gave myself Poetic License.

K (as Meghan): *So, can you think of anything you have in common with the story? (Claire shakes her head.) Maybe our friends can help us again. Let's play "Fill in the Space." We'll make a whole long line of connections.*

Claire, you said earlier you get motion sickness, right? (Claire nods.) And last summer you were in a canoe at camp, right?

L (as Claire): *Well, yeah, I sat in one once.*

K (as Meghan): *Well those are connections. So what did it look like when you were in the canoe?*

Scene 6

L: Predictions!

K: My experience told me that most children love storytelling so I created the Story Wizard character. She's a fictional cowgirl who loves helping little kids wrangle up some reading strategies. Here, she helps the audience understand the predicting strategy:

K (as the Story Wizard): *Yeah, yeah, that's right. An then there's the P—predictin'. (SW puts away the cord and takes out a set of binoculars. She gets Braidie to look through them.) It's like these binoculars. Predictin' is like lookin' into the future and thinkin' about what might happen next in the story.*

L (as Braidie): *I don't understand. Can you give me an example?*

K (as the Story Wizard): *Your mama packed you a basket of grub, right?*

L (as Braidie): *Yeah.*

K (as the Story Wizard): *So look ahead into the story. Whatcha think yer gonna do with that grub?*

L (as Braidie): *I'll take it to my grandma's and have a picnic.*

K (as the Story Wizard): *Yes siree. Yer brains are workin' like likety split. That's called predictin'.*

L: From talking to teachers and children in the Vancouver area, I realized that the Tickle Trunk Players was a much needed theatre company. I predicted that it would need to be an educational theatre company—one that empowered children, giving them a space to learn important literacy strategies—but it needed to be really engaging for kids too! I chose to use Canadian folk tales (e.g., Carrier, 2004) when writing *Poetic License*. It gave youth an opportunity to make predictions based on pieces of literature.

K (as Meghan): *The men were all seated and ready to go. "Come on Baptiste! Are you oming or not?" shouted one of the men. Baptiste took the paddle and stepped into the canoe, the canoe that was somehow supposed to get them all home. "Well, Claire, do you remember what happens next?"*

L (as Claire): *Ummm. Ummm. I'm sorry Meghan. I'm ahhhh, (pause) stuck.*

K (as Meghan): *Well, maybe we could use some help with this one. Let's play a game of 'Pop Up Story'. What was the last part you remember?*

L (as Claire): *Um. The boy was going to get into some kind of weird canoe?*

K (as Meghan): *OK. That was pretty close. Now we'll need some friends to come and help us make a tableau.*

Scene 7

L: Visualizing!

(K puts on hat)

K (as the Story Wizard): *And lastly there's V—visualizin'. This is when you 'magine what things look like in the story then you draw them in yer mind.*

L: Getting the older kids to understand visualizing had its own challenges. Here is a piece from *Poetic License*.

K (as Meghan): *Well, the writer had a lot of images in her story, you know, the 'golden, glowing pearl' and the 'flipping, flopping fish.'*

L (as Claire): *Images are like pictures right? I have a way to get ideas for that one!*

K (as Meghan): *You do?*

L (as Claire): *Sure! Let's have a draw!*

K (as Meghan): *Do you mean like a lottery?*

L (as Claire): *No. I mean a draw draw.*

K (as Meghan): *Do you mean like a Western movie draw? (Mimics a Western draw.)*

L (as Claire): *No. A real draw, where we draw what's in our head. We'll tell a little more of the story and ask our friends to draw what they imagine they can see.*

Scene 8

L (as Braidie) and K (as the Story Wizard) (*singing*):

Connect, predict, and then see it CPV. Yeah!

K: Ideas were carried like luggage between research, art-making/performance, and education. We were thinking not only about the researched reading strategies, but also about audience engagement, and response. Would the play make them laugh? Would the audience understand the story? What would they be learning?

L: Eventually the plays were performed. We remained engaged with the process, performing the roles that we had written. Through the process of creating the Tickle Trunk Players and of writing plays for its repertoire, we have learned more about a/r/tography—that it can begin with research, with art or with teaching, and that it traverses personal, cultural, and educational spaces.

K: Ultimately, researching, art-making, and teaching each connects to and informs the other, creating what Pearse calls an “aesthetic synthesis” (Pinar, 2004, p. 20).

Conclusion

Using a/r/tography as a methodology allowed us to research the creative process of the Tickle Trunk Players in a manner that honors the data in an authentic living way. In taking on identities (artist, researcher, teacher) within the dramatized dialogue, Kari and Lori highlighted the multiple roles they assume while creating and performing educational theatre. We (the authors) shared how these shifting identities complimented one another as well as allowed us to think more intricately about literacy practices—as performer, playwright, researcher, and educator. We also explored the notion that identity is dialogic, in that it continues to be shaped by the context we are engaged in while at the very same time we are partially shaping the identities of students as audience members, learners, co-actors. We believe that as performers we have the

potential to reach beyond classroom walls, interact with students inside their local communities, and help shape multiple identities and literacy practices in schools.

When the Tickle Trunk Players theatre company was formed, Lori and Kari chose to remain engaged with the process as playwrights, teachers, and performers. Rather than performing traditional research on this theatre company—such as how the product (i.e., the performance itself) affected its audience or on the reviews that students write in response—in this paper we explore an insider, behind-the-scenes perspective of authoring and touring plays. As researchers we were particularly interested in how creators embrace multiple identities and positions in order to promote the curricula that schools (in our case B.C. schools) are mandating.

Through this research we have recognized how authors make continual shifts, moving in and between identities and positions, becoming artists, teachers, researchers, and writers, insiders and outsiders. In other words, authors embrace multiple roles in order to write their stories through art-making and performance, research the pedagogies they are promoting (e.g., comprehension strategies, embodied literacy practices) and interpret how the audience is responding to these ideas, to teach both students and teachers about the social practices of literacy.

By using a/r/tography as a research methodology—an inquiry that includes paying close attention to multiple positions and the on-going, unfolding process—we have come to a better understanding of the nature and impetus of the work developed and created by the Tickle Trunk Players. Through this arts-based inquiry we explored ways in which educators can re-imagine theatre performances as engaging pedagogical spaces where learners generate and revise their own stories, conduct research, and feel engaged and inside literature on a visceral level.

In addition, the a/r/tographical research within this paper demonstrated the interconnectedness between research, writing, art-making, and teaching, suggesting how these are not separate or autonomous. In fact, we suggest and illustrate how creative and academic discourses can be interwoven and placed into the same trunk. This is because they share similar underlying processes. As Rogers (personal communication, October, 27, 2007) suggests, "they [research, art-making, and education] are playful and satisfy the three year old in all of us who is asking why? And how? While also satisfying the grown ups in us who want to make the world a richer and better place for everyone, perhaps especially for our children and youth."

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