

Choreographing the Story

by Niki Tulk, Parsons The New School for Design

At some point we must look inward for our education. We must notice what inhibits our freedom, be willing to give up all preconceptions, be truthful, and relax, in order to act [write] from lively emptiness.

—Ruth Zaporah

Life opens in this order: movement, breath, then voice. Only much later do we write; and when we *do* write, our work appears initially as images, drawn shapes representing what we see around us—this has been true on a macro level in humanity’s historical emergence from oral to written culture, as well as on an ongoing, micro level: for each individual human as she grows, drawing is a precursor to script. All writing, then, begins as movement, followed by breath, then voice, then the hand; at which point the body again shapes the words on paper, in sand, in the air, on the screen. All writing, therefore, proceeds from the *body*, from the way our physical selves connect with the world. It is time to welcome back the body into its place of memory-keeper, life-experiencer, word-shaper.

If as educators we deny or limit this vital and visceral lineage of literacy, it stands to reason that we deny also a powerful conductor and storehouse of skills and ideas; one that will not only bring depth and higher-order abstract thinking to literacy activities, but also actually open up successful learning pathways for our students, and unblock those who are compelled—by our narrow institutional learning paradigms—to view reading and writing as something purely cerebral, disconnected from the rest of their physical bodies, something in which you sit still at a desk, in silence, to engage.

The idea that somehow learning is even *divided* into “cerebral” and “the rest of the body” is absurd—we have a neck for a reason (a fact lost to us during the Enlightenment, ironically enough) and our brain is a muscle in constant, intimate, powerful and—most importantly—*dialogical* relationship with the rest of our muscles (our body). Brain and body are profoundly connected, and to “sever” this connection through a particular mode of literacy teaching is like taking two wheels off a car and then expecting it to move up the road quickly, smoothly and to its full potential; you can’t drive a car on an engine alone.

To rectify this is not simply a matter, I would suggest, of embracing “kinesthetic” as *one* type of learning pathway (i.e. Howard Gardner), but acknowledging—as

praxis—that every learner is kinesthetic *first and foremost*, due to the fact that their first and fundamental learning experience is in and through their physical body. All other learning styles, therefore, are arguably out-workings of different parts of that same body, with preferences varying for each individual: the voice, the eyes, different areas of the brain associated with a range of reasoning frameworks.

The need then is for educators to see embodied literacy as not just another new and exciting pedagogical possibility to be tapped by those with theatrical/artistic leanings, but actually where literacy *begins*, as well as the fundamental pathway through which literacy skills continue to develop. Embodied literacy is not simply a modular add-on to our teaching toolkit, but—I would suggest—no truly successful literacy practice can properly exist *without* acknowledging and incorporating the body.

If we accept this idea (the body as already embedded in literacy practice) then what could this possibly look like in a literacy classroom? Many Language Arts teachers do not (yet) see themselves as capable of, or drawn to incorporating the body into their practice—that is the area traditionally attributed to “drama teachers” (or whatever other term is used in our expert-obsessed culture to denote those individuals qualified and rubber-stamped to do something physically innovative in their classroom). I contest this. Every adult I know was once a child, tired out at the end of the day by playing. Every adult was once, and is still, an expert in play—an expert in exploring, tasting, testing, expressing the world through their arms, legs, hands, eyes. Maria Montessori built her entire educational philosophy on the premise that we should “never get ahead of the hand,” and she did so for a reason: because this is how every child navigates their world. I would suggest that this child is you, this child is I—regardless of how we have been gradually made to think of ourselves as adults.

But back to the pen on the page (if I can be allowed to indulge in an analogue world for a moment). Writing is created and supported by syntax. The components of language are the building blocks by which we create on the page images we hold in our minds, so that others can experience them. As I have suggested above, our bodies *physically produce* the written text—both by virtue of being an essential mechanical tool, but also, and perhaps more significantly, being the catalyst and “warehouse” for the *substance* of that text, and specifically the words that convey meaningful and complex thought and reasoning. Lakoff and Johnson (1980, 1999) discovered that “the body can influence cognitive process by means of metaphor,” in that the mind understands abstractions by means of very concrete images grounded in kinesthetic experience, such as a the substance/impact of an idea being “weighty” or “light.” They showed that it is

through the *body* that we come to terms with complex ideas. Pulling together this and other, similar research, Slepian and Ambady write that:

This growing body of work has demonstrated that cognitive content (concepts) can be metaphorically embodied in sensorimotor systems (Landau, Meier, & Keefer, 2010)—showing that the body provides a scaffold for abstract concepts (Williams, Huang, & Bargh, 2009). A separate body of work also demonstrates that gestures influence thought processes (e.g., Casasanto, 2011; Goldin-Meadow & Beilock, 2010). Gestures, for instance, can aid in spatial representation by allowing direct expression of spatial properties, lessening the need for a translation to verbal codes, and therefore alleviating working memory resources (Hostetter & Alibali, 2008), consequently improving spatial problem solving and enhancing speech fluency (Goldin-Meadow & Beilock, 2010). Additionally, motor experience can also change cognitive processes. (Slepian & Ambady, 2012)

What is strongly implied across all these findings is that there exists a *physical* syntax, grounded in concrete movements—and by syntax I mean a set of structural components within a framework that can be ordered and re-ordered to create different sets of meaning, or “texts.” When we accept that syntax can be understood this way, it is then possible (and exciting) to apply this mode of “writing” to our literacy classrooms. For example, we can break down the components of sound and movement into both physical and vocal gestures, then explore these “parts of speech” outside the lineal, two-dimensional framework of the page; which we can do because our page is suddenly the room, the actual space around us that we can inhabit and move through. We can create thought sequences through movement and sound in a range of ways, from more realistic scenes to more emotive/conceptually-based, “avant-garde” work. In shifting to a kinesthetic way of “writing” we find the body discovers a new language with which to speak. When the hand then comes to write on the page, it does so enriched with a much deeper conceptual understanding and capacity to creatively generate ideas.

In my own classrooms (which have ranged over the years from elementary to graduate students) we intentionally give time to play within game structures, inspired by the dramatic improvisational model called Action Theatre, pioneered by Ruth Zaporah. This new syntax—choreographed, easily learned, simple “frames” of physical action—enables participants to hear stories in new and unexpected ways; “fluid, creative thinking is grounded in fluid movement” (Slepian & Ambady, 2012). When interspersed with time and silence to write, the written work produced in these settings is always more layered, complex and meaningful, and often surprising. One student in a workshop I ran recently

commented that she had to stop a writing exercise, as her words were coming out of a deep place that she felt she needed to deal with alone. I could encourage her that if her body was nudging her with this material, then she could trust she was ready to write it, and affirm her own wisdom that she needed to find a felicitous space to do this where she could take her time.

Some of the different activities in this sort of pedagogical environment may involve participants speaking a story as a partner moves, interrupting each other with improvised life stories, and moving in response to words spoken by others; with writing interwoven throughout. Structured, unusual and fun experimentation is a form of improvisation that reinvents language, and invites everyone to enter a new cultural space together. Soja (1996) discusses the implications of a “Thirdspace” in which the traditional binary of historicity and sociology is melded with “lived space” and a trialectic is formed in which everything becomes possible; the space becomes hybrid, energized (in a very literal sense) where praxis is like breathing. We are both on our feet and at our desks, working within set and achievable parameters that mean we are liberated to investigate and play.

This is not traditional improvisation, where we create “believable” stories that “make sense” to our rational mind. In those modes it is often the more traditionally articulate, the more confident, who may homogenize the story-making (Slepian et al. 2014). It may be fun, but not for those who feel constrained by lack of vocabulary (moving and spoken) belonging to the dominant cultural milieu. By bringing in more experimental forms perhaps associated more with performance art, it is not possible to have a rational story as such—it is constantly interrupted throughout an improvisation; vocalizing sounds and feelings, for example, are as significant as actual words. Gestures become meaningful for their repetition and order, not just because they “make sense” culturally. This version of *Thirdspace* engenders its own ever-evolving language and processes; this is freeing, exciting and also both funny and moving for participants and witnesses. The fruit of this is always confidence in language itself, and translates to fluidity and confidence in written expression. It is, in effect, the body’s way of catalyzing and generating the writing process. We play, then write, play then write again. For the most part, we don’t talk about acting, moving, or writing—we simply do it, and “devote ourselves to the exploration of the phenomenon we call awareness. [We] practice techniques to increase [our] skills of perception. [We] aware together.” (Zaporah, 1995, p. 1)

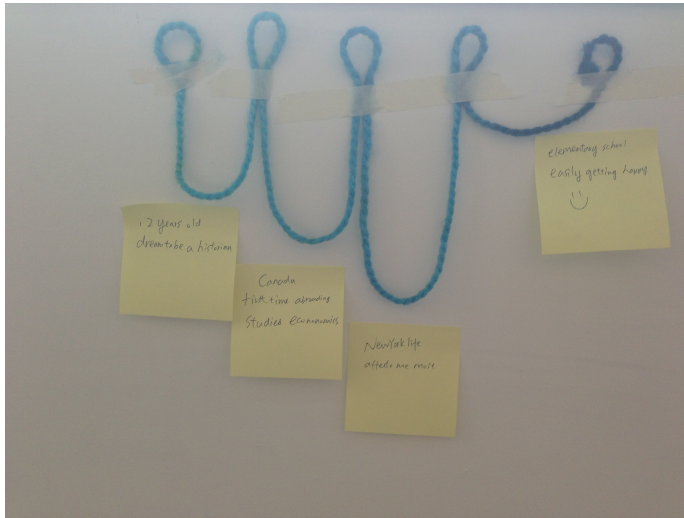
But utilizing the body is not about only one way to work; the body can be engaged in quieter, less performative ways—because embodied literacy is about inclusivity, not about setting up a new hierarchy of expertise in the delivery and experience of learning. I currently teach Writing-as-Making (the Art College

equivalent of Rhetoric and Composition freshman programs) at Parsons the New School for Design in New York City, where the majority of my first-year students come from cultures where placing themselves bodily “out front” in any way (from assertive eye contact, to contributing un-asked to class discussion) is at best only for actual rehearsed performances/presentations, or at worst a severe act of disrespect. And yet by intentionally applying a whole-self approach to literacy, I have witnessed the confidence, skill-set and quality of work grow consistently.

This holistic, embodied approach has been not about my own individual pedagogical practice but, wonderfully, a departmental-wide paradigm shift that took eleven years to gestate and two years to actually roll out. And when it came time to introduce this new curriculum for its Freshman year, as faculty we received a rare gift—to co-create a program that uses design, literature, writing, the body in space and the urban landscape to create an interdisciplinary curriculum of writing-as-making; one that empowers learners from varied cultural and linguistic backgrounds to fall in love with the written word. Students—both native speakers and language-supported—have explored their world and responded with deeply personal and political interventions in sites around the city and within Parsons. The effect for them, and us, has been life-changing.

I have now taught five iterations of this program, many of them with ESL/Language-assisted learners, and each one has transformed how we think, learn and make our art; and how we see ourselves as citizens. We have used research and read texts that encourage critical literacy, we ask questions of society through texts such as: *The People’s History of the United States* (Zinn, 1980) and *The Middle Passage: White Ships/Black Cargo* (Feelings, 1995). We read YA novels: *The Good Braider* (Farish, 2012), *Uprising* (Haddix, 2011), *Crossing the Wire* (Hobbs, 2007) and *Farewell to Manzanar* (Housten, 2002) and others, works probing areas ranging from the internment of American citizens of Japanese descent during WW2, to current migration across the U.S./Mexico border, to novels exploring early 20th century immigrant lives around where Parsons now stands in Greenwich Village.

Read-alouds by the teacher and amongst students are common: picture books on journeys/shifts/migrations (including Polacco’s *The Keeping Quilt* & *The Blessing Cup*, Shaun Tan’s *The Arrival*). Sometimes we use large projections of the texts. Students draw while they listen—fluid movement embedded in the same part of the brain as abstract and metaphorical thinking (Slepian & Ambady, 2012).



We enjoyed each making a “string journey” of thread around the room, students chose points along the string to pin post-it note sketches and ideas of key people, places and moments in their journey so far—including significant shifts in their family history. Where were they shifted? Why? Even in this way, they were exploring movement of bodies. They chose three moments and wrote from those places, in both their home language and English.

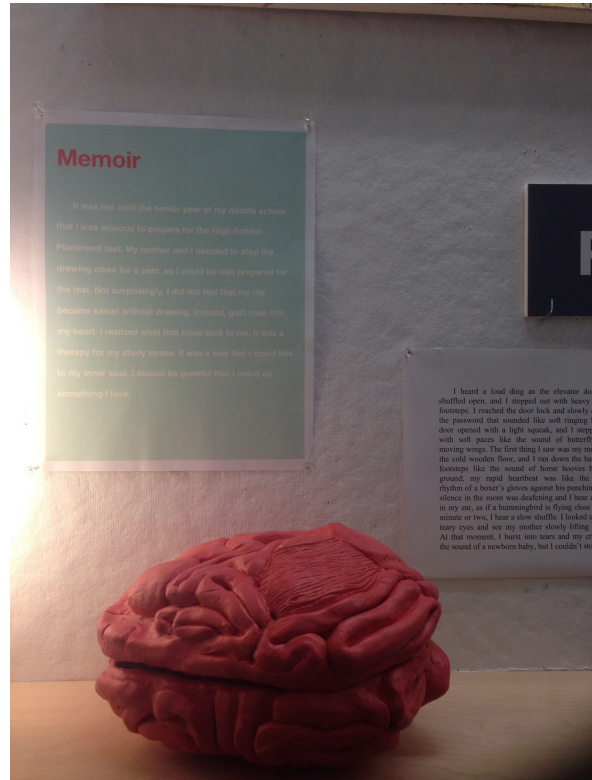


Students conducted interviews, with two different generation family members, and created a memoir and an artifact that reflected Three Stages of Family. For many, some thousands of miles from home, this was a treasured project. One student used her hands to create a model of the brain, and inside this model of her brain, she traced words sharing how her family and memories form who she is, her memoir.

Students research urban design, the history of different specific sites in New York City, and explore the many ways people use and experience these urban spaces. They reflect; they write poetry. Students write from multiple points of view, including imagining they speak as the geographical spaces they have explored; they respond to research questions through sculpture, film, and installations. In these and other ways, they explore their own personal shifts and changes in both a wider political, and familial/generational context.

Our students learn that every site has multiple stories that conflict, collate and collide; that these stories are told through people, buildings, events and wider historical happenings, of which our own stories are a part. They learn that we need to research and learn in order to deepen the work we make, and how to go about finding research that helps us solve our artistic problems—particularly, how to create an organic design and piece of experiential art that dialogues with its landscape/site. It's all about the questions: questions are not just to initiate the learning, but the aim becomes to leave with more and “better” questions. Many of the students have come through education where questions are rarely part of the learning, here they are absolutely central. Some that we explore as we move around the room, the studio, and the wider world to complete our projects involve exploring what are our own stories of shifting? How do these shifts come to pass? How do we talk about them through our work? What are others' stories of shifting? How are their stories interwoven with our own?

As we move outside the classroom walls, we explore what designed and found/“natural” interventions and elements we interact with, even without realizing, and start to interrogate the messages communicated through these artifacts; in what ways are values and cultural ideals being transmitted to us,



and/or constructed around us in these everyday spaces. We ask: in what ways can we respond, engage, dialogue or intervene with the sites or communities we find there? What alternative contexts and stories could we imagine? Who or what is rendered “unseen” or invisible?

For a key project, students choose a path/journey that they take regularly and create a map—streets, signage, art interventions, types of shops/businesses, subway stations, and significant artifacts. Students are asked to pay attention to the visual culture created—what messages are offered or imposed, what voices and ideas are privileged or hidden? They choose five different elements to document photographically; this is not about how artistic their photos are, but about clarity and specificity. Students write down observations of each artifact/element, for example what they think it “speaks” into the space around it, then formulate specific *questions* for each chosen image. Students combine their images in a digital presentation format, with a recording of their own voice speaking their both observations and queries. In presenting to the class, they must be prepared to have their questions, questioned; to discuss how and why they chose that line of inquiry, along with its suggestions and ramifications for their research and practice.



In groups, students design an installation and/or happening that the rest of the class will travel to and experience; one that incorporates: a viewing tool, something we look through that changes the way we see the space; an imaginary animal designed to live in this site; and research into their location.

In every iteration of the course, we create aphorisms based on our own discoveries and mount these (guerrilla-style) around the school. Students create interventions and happenings in public places, and design ways for their poetry to visually and audibly speak from classroom—and lobby—walls.

In all this, students have come to love and learn that research, writing, revising is part of participating—and igniting—vital conversations; that such dialogue feeds (and sometimes *is*) the art. Most of the students are artists/designers and arrive afraid and angry about literacy, so the challenge is to crack open their perspectives and allow them the space to fall in love with their own and new languages—and to see the connections between them.

And this begins with movement—from theatre improvisation in some contexts, to running yarn around the room on which to hang writing ideas and sketches. We move to find our words, we then allow our words to move outside and around the city. With each new word, movement and story, we are compelled by the very explosion of expectations and traditional syntax to experience and witness ideas in a different way, which we then transform into radical writing.

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