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Some Parallels Between Written and Visual Literacy Learning

Jerome C. Harste

Abstract: As both an artist and a literacy scholar, the author shares what he sees as principles operating across literacy learning in both art and written language. These principles involve taking risks, seeing problems as potentials, and trusting the learning process. Using stories and artifacts from his career as a writer and pieces of art from his career as an artist, the author illustrates each key point.

Keywords: arts, literacy learning, teacher research, visual literacy, risk, textuality



Jerome C. Harste is a member of the Alliance of Distinguished professors at Indiana University in Bloomington. His seminal research on what young children know about language and language learning changed the profession's notions about how to teach reading and writing. Since his retirement in 2006, Harste has taken up art, working in water-based mediums. He has earned "Signature Status" in several watercolor societies and his artwork has been featured in several issues of JoLLE. Harste uses his art, as he did his professional writing, to speak back to issues of injustice and inequality. As an advocate for an expanded definition of literacy, multimodality, critical literacy, ethnographic approaches to the study of language, semiotics, and socio-psycholinguistics, Harste has advocated crossing borders throughout his professional life. Jerome C. Harste can be contacted at jerry.harste@gmail.com.

Introduction¹

Despite the fact that I am known as a researcher and an artist, I have always considered myself first and foremost a teacher. I think I can safely say the same for my research partners, past and present. Our interest in literacy generally, and early literacy specifically, is an interest in how to set up more supportive environments for language learning in schools.

While I see myself as a teacher researcher, I always wanted to be an artist. As a child I sent in a drawing to the Dunwoody Institute to see if they would accept me based on an advertisement I read on the back of a matchbook cover. I was elated to receive a letter of acceptance.

When I showed this to my father, he dogmatically announced, “Harste men are not artists.” While my father squelched my dream, I defied him by becoming a doodler, something that I found very helpful to do during faculty meetings throughout my life as a literacy professor.

It was Carolyn Burke, Virginia Woodward, and my research on what young children know about reading and writing prior to going to school that re-kindled my interest in studying art (Harste, Woodward, & Burke, 1984). Young children as early as three, four, five, and six years old freely moved across various sign systems (art, writing, math, drama) in an effort to mean.

One of my favorite pieces of data, collected from Alison at age six, was her multimodal representation of a telephone conversation she had with her friend Jennifer (see Figure 1). After church Jennifer was going to bring her tutu, slippers, and hair ribbon in a

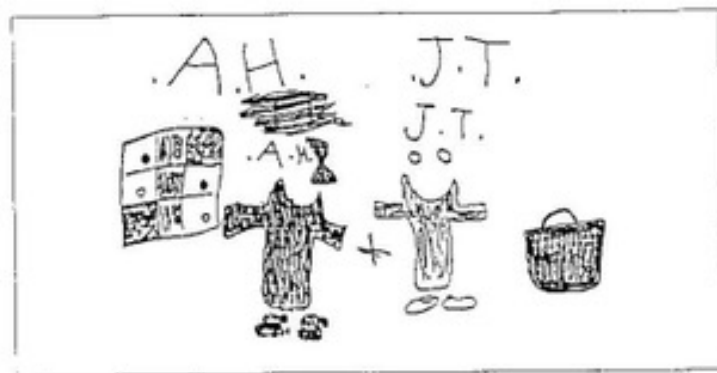


Figure 1. Uninterrupted Writing and Drawing, Alison, Age 6 (from Harste, Woodward & Burke, 1984)

bag over to Alison’s house, and Alison was going to get her tutu, slippers, and hair ribbon from the dresser in her room. Together they were going “to play ballerina” (Alison’s words).

There are three things that fascinated me about this note. The first was the sheer economy of the art itself. It captures the subject and sets the tone. The second thing was that Alison uses language (letters), art, and mathematics (the plus sign) to record her message. She very freely moved across sign systems in an attempt to mean. The third thing that fascinated me was the sheer elegance of the note itself. There is no clutter. We can only wish that our telephone conversations ended in as tidy a presentation as what Alison at age six was able to record in just seconds after getting off the phone.

Children as early as three were equally stunning. Figure 2 is a picture of an elephant drawn by a three-year old. What struck me is how much more we know about the child’s conception of an elephant from their drawing than we do from their merely saying or attempting to write the word “elephant.”

¹ I acknowledge that there is a gender spectrum and that myriad pronouns exist that I can use when referring to individuals in my writing. Throughout this article I use

pronouns to refer to individuals that correspond with the pronouns that they use to refer to themselves.

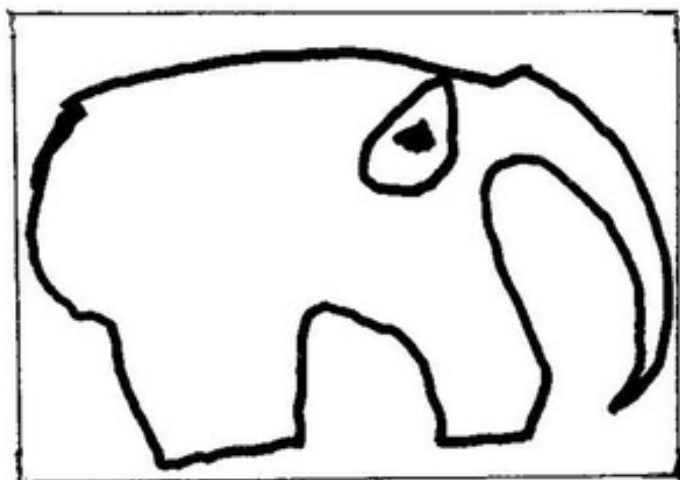


Figure 2. Uninterrupted Drawing of an Elephant (from Harste, Woodward, & Burke, 1984)

Because of these experiences, I have argued for an expanded notion of literacy, one that includes not only written language literacy but also visual literacy. In an effort to study more carefully the generative effects of moving across sign systems, I created an instructional strategy called “Sketch to Stretch.” In its simplest form “Sketch to Stretch” asks readers to take what they make of reading a text and symbolize it in the form of a sketch. What I have found is that often their sketches capture understandings not present in their retellings.

Matt’s sketch-to-stretch from Marjorie Siegel’s dissertation (1994, 1995) is a case in point. Matt had read *Ira Sleeps Over* (Waber, 1975) about two boys having their first sleep over. Matt’s sister heckles him by asking, “How will you feel sleeping without your teddy bear for the very first time? Hummmmmmm?” “What do you think your friend is going to say when he finds out the name of your teddy bear is Foo-Foo, Hummmmmmm?”

When Matt was asked to talk about his sketch (see Figure 3) and specifically the formula he had constructed across the top, he said, “A boy plus a

teddy bear plus another boy plus a teddy bear equals two good friends.” Now if you know *Ira Sleeps Over*, this has to be one of the most elegant summaries of a book that anyone might possibly construct. Like Alison’s sketch, the meaning or significance of the event has not only been captured, but the presentation is both uncluttered and elegant.

While I could go on and on about where my interest in art came from, suffice it say, that when I retired from Indiana University I decided to become a practicing artist. To facilitate this goal, I have studied art for the past 12 years by constantly taking art classes from some of the most talented water-media artists I could find and afford. As a result I am now a “signature member” of the Missouri Watercolor Society, the Bloomington Watercolor Society, and well on my way to gaining a similar status in the Hoosier Salon and the Watercolor Society of Indiana. “Signature Status” in a watercolor society essentially means that you are recognized as a master watercolorist by fellow members in that society. It is a bit like being promoted to professor at a university.



Figure 3. Matt’s Sketch-to-Sketch (from Siegel, 1984, 1985)

So far I have introduced what I want to say by first of all making it clear that if you scratch me hard enough, despite my coming here to talk about my art, I am first and foremost a literacy professor interested in broadening our profession's understanding of literacy for purposes of preparing literacy citizens for the 21st century. While I no longer see art as being a tool and toy for enhancing written language literacy but a form of literacy in its own right, I remain interested in how understanding art literacy might advance the understanding of written language literacy and literacy more broadly. To these ends I am going to share with you three principles that I see operating in learning both art and written language.

Principle 1: Both art and written language learning demand risking action.

I have come to fully endorse [Jasper Johns's advice to artists](#): "Do something. Do something to that something. Then do something to that something and soon you will have something."

As a practicing artist my motto has become, "Ruin at least one sheet of paper a day." Intentionality, as a starting point in producing art, doesn't really restrict my alternatives. Typically, I paint things about which I feel strongly, both intellectually and emotionally.

To clarify my current thinking about art, let me say that I think art at its most powerful speaks back to what is commonly taken for granted in a search for truth. I think the fact that art does this aesthetically invites reflection rather than offense, and when successful, the impulse to change how one is being seen or positioned in the world. I wish I could say that all of my art meets these criteria; unfortunately, they do not. Nonetheless, the art pieces that I am going to share in this paper, I think, come close.



Figure 4. Fountain of the Muses (Photograph by JCHarste)

Figure 4 is a photo of Carl Milles' Fountain of the Muses at Brookgreen Gardens in Murrell's Inlet, South Carolina. I absolutely love this sculpture and the feeling I get from the sheer aesthetics of the piece. The muses are light, joyful, running, and receiving their gifts from the Gods. Here we have the poet, the sculptor, the musician, the artist, and one muse, like us, still waiting to see what gift God might bestow.

I also love watching the people who come to view the sculpture and ponder its meaning. While the gardens, reflecting pool, and water spraying from the nostrils of the dolphins on which the muses are positioned are beautiful, these factors themselves do not fully explain why so many visitors, like me, report that their initial sighting almost took their breath away.

Figure 5 reproduces a piece of art that I created in response to this fountain. Because I wanted to capture what the experience meant to me, aesthetics played a central role. To capture the uplifting qualities that the sculpture exudes, I laid down vertical strings and overlaid these with tissue paper.



Figure 5. The Muses Among Us (JCharste, 2015)

Historically the arts are seen as gifts from the gods making mere mortals something more. There are really three layers here: The muses, the people viewing the muses, and then the shadows of all of us looking in on the unfolding. I've entitled this piece, "The Muses Among Us."

I started this piece by taking out a 30"x 30" inch piece of my best watercolor paper and then froze. The paper seemed too pristine. The voice in my head kept saying, "You're going to mess up."

Since I didn't know if laying down strings and covering everything in tissue paper was going to set the mood I wanted, I decided I might just as well start with a used sheet on watercolor paper. In that failed painting I had tried to capture my feelings about the central role that conversation plays in learning.

The tissue paper gave an ephemeral if not mystical feel. Using charcoal, I began to add the muses. I was pleasantly pleased with this start as well as surprised how clearly the people I had tried to paint in the failed painting were showing through. While I probably should have seen this as a problem, I saw it

as an inspiration. Rather than lose them completely, I decided to incorporate them into the painting—they could be the masses looking in.

To mute them even more I added a second layer of tissue paper on which I added the observers contemplating the muses. The result is this three-tiered painting containing the muses, the observers, and the masses looking in.

My first "do something" was to get rid of the clean sheet of art paper and substitute it for one that was already messed up. I had little to lose. My second "do something" related to setting the stage—I wanted the feeling of water flowing, verticality, and softness. To that end I laid down string, spritzed the tissue paper pink, and glued it on top of the original



Figure 6. American Heritage (JCharste, 2008)

painting. My third “do something” was to add muses and people observing the muses, and, when necessary, pull out the underlying faces I wanted to keep from the original painting. The next result was that I thought I had something.

American Heritage (see Figure 6) has a similar history. My art teacher, Linda Myer-Wright, asked me to cut three shapes out of contact paper, something most people normally use to line kitchen shelves. I cut three heart-shaped images and stuck them on my water color paper in what I thought was an interesting configuration. Linda then asked me to spritz the paper with a solution of watercolor paint of our choosing. After the painting had dried, Linda asked me to throw away the contact paper pieces and make something out of the images that were left. That was the entirety of her instruction. My hearts turned out to look more like butts to me than hearts, so I decided to pull out three images of men in various positions of erectness. Although I wasn’t very excited about the piece, I put it aside. It took me months to take the painting further. One day when reading a book on the Sioux Nation, I had an inspiration. Why not juxtapose an American Indian over the ever-erect figures to suggest civilized man? This appealed to me as it challenged historical accounts of American Indians, and it simultaneously suggested our country’s roots. To further highlight the historical stereotypes surrounding American Indians as savages, I used gesso to stencil in the jungle-like wavy lines in the painting.

I liked the final product, and I was particularly pleased when it got juried into the Missouri International Watercolor Show. More to the point, however, readers will again note the “do-something-do-something-do-something” pattern underlying its creation.

Principle 2: Risk involves trouble; luckily, trouble invites abduction.

John Deely (1982) argues that there are really three kinds of logic. He defines inductive logic as involving collecting data and coming to a conclusion. Others can verify the thinking used via an audit trail. Deductive logic begins with a conclusion or theory from which hypotheses are generated and tested. Abductive logic follows no traceable path. Deely quotes Charles Sander Pierce as likening it to intuition, a conclusion reached through piecing together of a lot of sensory cues. Abductive logic, Deely argues, takes learners to new ground.

The third painting that I want to share is really a failed muse painting (see Figure 7). As you can see, my thinking was that what worked once might work again. To that end I took out a 12”x 18” piece of 140-pound watercolor paper and, after laying down strings, covered the entire painting with tissue paper.

In this painting I wanted to capture the need to break down walls, as historically both writing and art were seen as a gift from the Gods. Few of us would receive these gifts.



Figure 7. Jericho Draft (JCharste, 2016)



Figure 8. Jericho (JCHarste, 2016)

I began by adding muses, but this time I wanted to create the illusion of them creating new territory by breaking down old walls. To that end I used charcoal to sketch in the muses and white gesso to create a crumbling stone wall.

I was taking a course on composition with Rebecca Zdybel at the time, so I was trying to use one of the art designs that she had shown us. Somehow, no matter how I placed the muses, they seemed isolated and unconnected to each other, and failed to move the eye through the painting.

Being frustrated, and in an effort to tie the painting together, I suddenly had an epiphany. I grabbed a paintbrush full of watery black gesso and decided to overlay the design itself right over the various muses that I had scaling the paper (see Figure 8).

While only the most observant viewers will see the residual of the muses in this painting, I love the miraculous effect of the lightning-like design and the wall crumbling.

I entitled the piece “Jericho” and recently sold it to a collector in Toronto. Prior to that sale I entered it into the Missouri Membership Show, where it was given an Honorary Award, and in the 93th Annual

Hoosier Salon Show, where it was awarded “best non-objective abstract.”

Principle 3: Abduction invites optimism,chutzpah, and trust in yourself and the learning process.

The next painting I want to share with you is a painting I call “Hoosier Basketball” (see Figure 9). For those of you who know Jacob Lawrence’s work (Wheat & Lawrence, 1986), you will no doubt see the

influences: powerful figures and flat, pure colors, all in service to the emotional experience being recreated which takes central stage. Through art, Jacob Lawrence, himself an African American, captured the Black experience of growing up in the U.S.

I did several workshops for teachers using Jacob Lawrence’s work as a model from which one might grow as an artist and literacy learner. After identifying a social issue about which they felt



Figure 9. Hoosier Basketball (JCHARSTE, 2010)

strongly, I invited teachers to use Jacob Lawrence's sense of art to capture their emotional response to the issue they wished to paint.

In Bloomington, Indiana, as in Athens, Georgia, basketball is a big deal. In this painting I tried to capture "Hoosier Pride" as well as the dominance, intimidation, and often unfairness (essentially blocking the hoop) of the Hoosiers as they supposedly engage in "play."

Some might call this a forgery, as it mirrors Jacob Lawrence's thinking about art as well as his style. Yet, I see it as an instance of not only what all artists

and writers do, but what it is they should do. It is by getting into the head of artist—by really understanding what the artist has done and was trying to do—that we grow as artists. What worked for Jacob Lawrence can work for you—not necessarily as a direct copy of his work, but as an opportunity to try out his style and thinking in a new work.

If Jacob Lawrence had been a Hoosier, this work may well be attributed to him. But this is not really my problem. If someone takes this piece and signs it with Jacob Lawrence's name, then that person, rather than me, is the one involved in forgery



Figure 10. Out of the Box Scholarship (JCharste, 2015)

While *Hoosier Basketball* as well as my painting *Out of the Box Scholarship* (see Figure 10) have been clearly influenced by my study of Jacob Lawrence, they are nonetheless Harste originals. Every painting I have ever painted shows the influence of someone I have studied or studied with closely.



Figure 11. *A Steadying Force* (JCharste, 2015)

An artist really doesn't have to worry about forgery in its pure sense. Even if I wanted to, it is more difficult than you think to replicate even what initially might appear to be forged work. Even with conscious effort, my paintings inevitably turn out to be unique.

I can't even forge myself. I have tried. The piece that JoLLE published in the spring of 2018 entitled "*A Steadying Force*" (see Figure 12) was really an attempt to replicate a piece I had done earlier of my mother as I remembered her (see Figure 11). "*Hannah's Lot in Life*," (Figure 13) is yet a third attempt. In each instance I began by wanting to replicate my first painting, yet somehow each came out very different, due in part no doubt to my being a different artist than I was when I created the first piece and to a series of little, but cumulative, decisions I made along the way.

In an article Peggy Albers, Vivian Vasquez, Hilary Janks, and I wrote on our experience running a summer institute exploring the maker movement in education, Peggy Albers argues that each design choice made by students led to abductive leaps that allowed students to explore anew the meaning potential of their work (Albers, Vasquez, Harste, & Janks, 2019).

Here is how Sonya Badani (2015), a photographer, describes the abductive process in a novel entitled *Trail of Broken Wings*:

When I take a picture, it's a multiple-step process. First I view the scene with my naked eye. Once I finalize the details, make sure the focus is clear, I look through the lens and start snapping....On rare occasions, something hidden finds its way into the picture. A person passing by, or an animal in flight. A child playing or a look between friends. Something I missed, because I was



Figure 12. A Steadying Force (JCharste, 2017)

so focused on the vision in my head, reveals itself in the picture. With the unexpected addition, I am mesmerized. The picture has a new life; one I would never have foreseen. It changes the story; what I had hoped to say becomes altogether different. The new story is superior; told in a way I couldn't fathom. Those are the moments when I especially love what I do. When the picture becomes

the storyteller and I am the recipient of the story it tells. (pp. 182-183)

Parallels to Writing

"Hell," for a writer, I'm convinced, is sitting in front of a computer screen with the curser constantly blinking just waiting for you, the writer, to have a brilliant idea. For an artist, "hell" is a blank sheet of



Figure 13. Hannah's Lot in Life (JCHarste, 2018)

paper. A blank sheet of paper may even be worse than a blinking cursor. Art paper is expensive and usually was purchased because fellow artists have extolled its virtue.

One difference between art and writing is that no matter how badly you begin in writing, it is always revisible. In art, while one can clearly do a lot more revising than most people believe, there comes a point at which one simply must start over.

Principle 1— “Both art and writing demand risking action”—can be seen as communal command. In order to become literate in both art and writing, the learner has to risk taking action.

One of the things we concluded from our studies of early literacy (Harste, Woodward, & Burke, 1984), was that reading and writing were closely related. Our recommendation was that if you want children to read, give them a piece of paper and let them write. If you want children to write, give them a book and let them read.

Although I know I am not justified in saying that in order to become a better writer, pick up a paintbrush and begin to paint, it does seem to be an abduction worthy of test. Almost every painting for which I wrote a poem has sold immediately. The Summer 2018 issue of JoLLE is a case in point. In that issue I included a poem to accompany *A Steadying Force* (2018).

Regardless, the thing I know for sure is that in order to become an artist, you need to pick up a paintbrush and paint. In order to become a writer you need to pick up a pen or sit at a keyboard and write. What you learn using one system of meaning supports what you need to learn in another system of meaning. Regardless of the mode, first drafts are more important than final drafts; first drafts keep the door open to real learning.

In working with doctoral students over my time at Indiana University, I found that it was really difficult to support students in thinking through their dissertation by simply having a conversation with them. My best advice often seemed to go in one ear and out the other. Many times the students, I found, were no further along in thinking through the dissertation on their second visit than they were on the first visit.

As a result, I instituted a policy that students needed to come to me with a rough draft of what they think their dissertation was about, why that is important, what data they are planning to collect, and at least some initial thinking about how they plan to do their analysis. What I found is that once we had a draft to work with, no matter how rough it may be, I could help them clarify their research question as well as share with them whom I thought they needed to read in addition to those they had already quoted.

I wrote many an article over my career with Dr. Carolyn Burke. Carolyn is a brilliant thinker but a very reluctant writer, so I often took it upon myself to write the first draft. We would often get together to discuss what it was we were going to write, outlining key points as well as identifying particular pieces of data we would use to illustrate those points. Believing I had everything very clear in my head, I would often go to write and be stymied as to where to begin. In desperation, I often found myself throwing away the outline and just beginning with an example that made sense to me. In spite of what we had outlined and talked about, my first draft often looked very different from the outline we had initially produced. Once I had a draft and had taken it in directions that fit the paper rather than the outline, both Carolyn and I could again tweak it so that the key points we wanted to make were not lost.

In both my work with doctoral students and in co-authoring articles, I want to suggest that this back-and-forth process is the same principle I see working in art: Do something. Do something to that something. Then do something to that something, and soon you will have something. Sound words of advice, I think, for both the fledgling artist as well as the fledgling writer.

As is evident in the examples I have shared, Principle 1 can and is often best done in the company of others. In a broadest sense Principle 1 is an argument that learning is a social event, regardless of whether we are talking about art or writing. It is also an argument that the experience of paying close attention to what others are doing and how they present their work is an important component of learning. The notion of intertextuality suggests that all texts are derivative of prior texts. This is true of someone's writing as well as their art, even though both the artist and the author may claim their work to be "original."

Principle 2— “Risk evokes trouble; luckily, trouble invites abduction” —is an invitation to artists as well as writers to take chances as well as to see problems as possibilities. Bill Cosaro, a professor of sociology at Indiana University, once told Debra Rowe, when she was sharing with him problems in the data collection for her dissertation, “Debra, when you can see what you call problems as data, you will have made a great leap forward in your becoming a researcher.” The same message holds true for writers as well as artists.

Problems point to the fact that your current hypothesis about the world is in need of revision. When things are not working as expected, the generative response is not to quit but rather to ask why. Problems for both artists and writers are best

seen as stepping stones to new ground.

“On no! Harste has gone nuts!” was the comment I heard from another student attending an art workshop with me. We had been asked by the workshop leader to create stamps that we might use in our painting, using carving tools to make imprints on corks and rubber erasers. I began stamping but then got carried away by covering my whole paper in two or three layers of stamps.

I set the paper on an easel and walked away. From afar it looked like the graffiti I had taken pictures of when teaching in Toronto (see Figure 14). That abduction led me to putting a graffiti artist at work in the painting (see Figure 15). I really liked the results, as I thought it spoke against most people’s

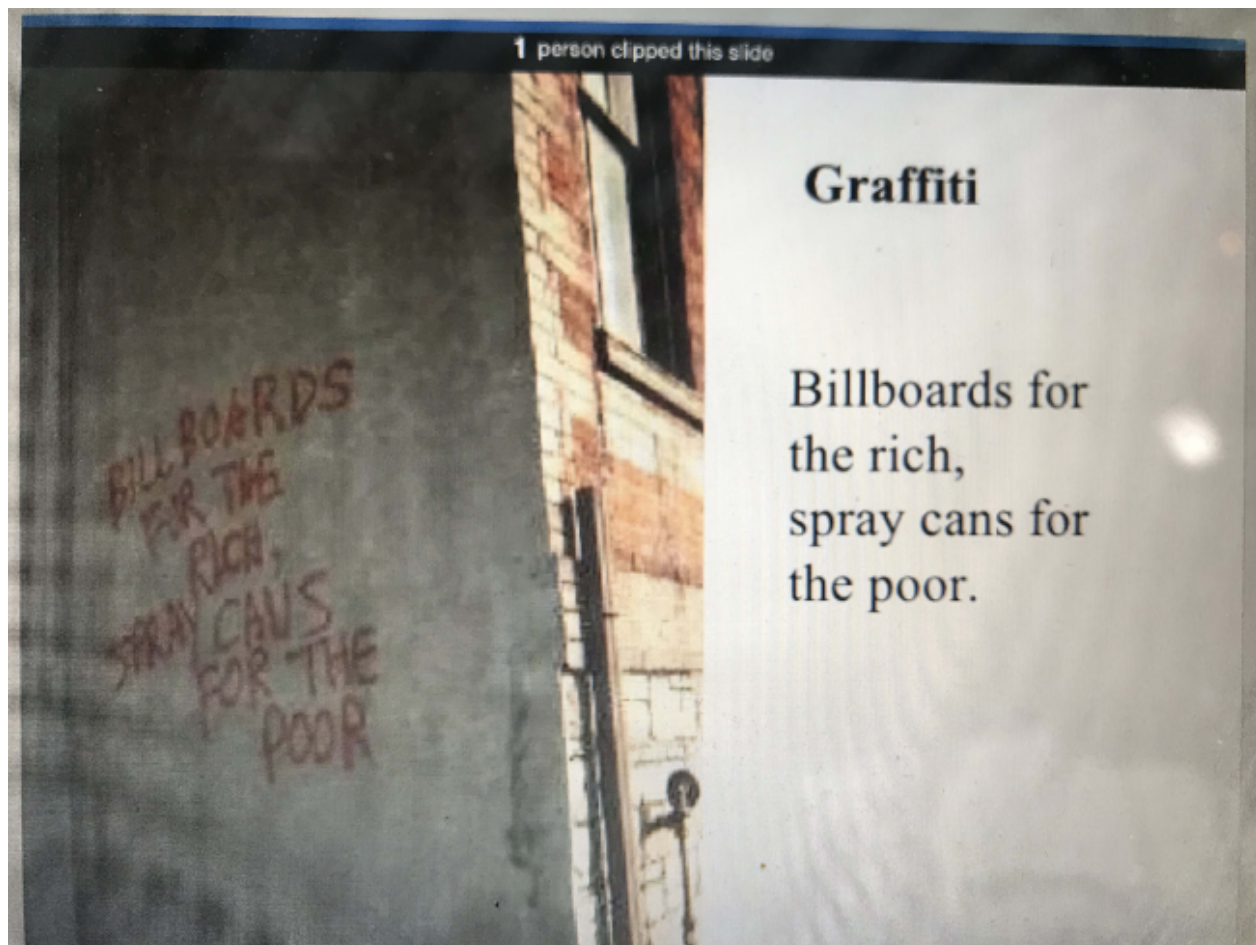


Figure 14. Toronto Graffiti (Photography by JCHarste, 2004)



Figure 15. Casting a Long Shadow (JCHarste, 2011)

notion of graffiti as being a defacement to public works. For me, this piece, like lots of graffiti, captures the voices of the commoner. A voice the one percent often doesn't hear.

Principle 3— "Abduction invites optimism, chutzpah and trust in yourself and the learning process"— captures the notion that through "doing something" and "seeing problems as possibilities," one not only develops voice but outgrows one's very self in the process.

Some wag once said, "Optimism is going after Moby-Dick, chutzpah is taking the tartar sauce with you." In a similar vein I want to argue that learning new techniques precipitates optimism as well as agency. This too is true for artists as well as writers.

With ongoing experience one continues to expand one's repertoire of self-correcting strategies.

One artist I studied with suggested that we identify a common object, and every time we sit down to paint, we warm up by first painting that object. At the time this advice was given to me, I had just returned from visiting the Modern Museum of Art in New York City and had seen Picasso's goat for the first time. I fell in love with it and did a sketch in my sketchbook. So, when the professor said, "Pick an object, the first thing that popped in my mind was 'Picasso's Goat.' You can guess the result, I have lots and lots of goat paintings in which I try out new techniques (see Figure 16). A wide range of techniques offers lots of ways to self-correct, as



Figure 16. Goat Paintings (Harste, 2006-Present)

inevitably, in both writing and art, one's text reaches that awkward teenage stage where there are glimmers of hope but lots of work still to do.

To synthesize my message, let me conclude by saying: Believe in the power of abduction. It is the only way that something new gets in the system, be that system written language, visual literacy, or curriculum.

It begins by risking action or, said differently, "Do something." Taken as a whole the lesson here is that you can trust the learning process. It works across sign systems and is the fodder upon which you and our profession might grow more inclusively.

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