

Understanding Classroom Spaces as Palimpsests: An Opportunity to Value Complexity and Layers

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Imagine a room in a school. It likely has four walls and a set of furniture that will accommodate a large group of students and one or two teachers. This room may also have some digital technologies that serve as tools for both teachers and students. In this space, the movement of young people as they begin and complete tasks can be a heady rush of activity: movement, talk, laughter, silence, and the clicking and scratching of pens on paper, fingers on keyboards and screens. In this room there is much to see and hear, and it is a complex amalgamation of people working for a variety of goals, and using a number of tools to help them do their work. It is a space that changes with each class period, each day, each year.

In contrast, the popular narrative about what happens in schools creates an image of teaching and learning as discrete, uncomplicated, and unchanging. Indeed, it is hard not to see schools as static when archaeological digs unearth school spaces that appear strikingly modern and familiar (Cole, 2010). This enduring image of schools has persisted over many decades and has manufactured images of a place in constant state of crisis (Berliner & Biddle, 1995; Berliner, Glass, & Associates, 2014; National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983). In this crisis mode, there is a strident refrain to seek out interventions and reforms because schools, both buildings and people inside those buildings, require intervention to fix them.

For evidence of this call and response focused on locating what is wrong in schools, and then finding a solution to repair them, let's take a look at the discussion about schools that plays out at the national level. Secretary of Education, Arne Duncan in the Obama Administration, offered a grant competition for states to prove their schools could be sites of improvement. These grants prioritized state adoptions of national standards, teacher accountability systems, and in return, served as a way to fix and mold students, faculty, and buildings ostensibly into what they assumed appeal to a 21st century palate.

The reality, though, of what happens with human beings populating classrooms is far more interconnected and interrelated, complex, and constantly in flux. As educators, then, how do we approach the work of research in schools in ways that can eschew the need for one-upmanship and finding fault, and instead seek to understand and build on the strengths of the kids and adults who come together in public school classrooms?

Our approach is to look to artists for inspiration. We examined an old-school social media site to consider questions of literacy, teaching, and learning. We focused on the multiple layers of graffiti, artwork, advertisements, and political agendas that appear on a tunnel in Atlanta, exploring the implications of considering physical space as a means for expression, and what future teachers in urban schools, and even the public writ large, can learn in examining these dynamic, ever-changing spaces (Miller & Norris, 2007). The tunnel is a palimpsest, or a space in which the writing and drawings are covered over, scratched out, and then layered with more and more images and words (All the original photographs are authored by Jonathan Spitlog).



In the Krog Street Tunnel traffic zooms by street art that changes by the day, week, sometimes by the hour. Visitors to Atlanta seek out the tunnel because of the art, the grittiness of the space, the layered quality of the walls and entrances. Residents of Cabbagetown and Reynoldstown, the two neighborhoods adjoining the tunnel, commute through the space, walk their dogs, run their exercise routes. The tunnel is adjacent to the city's Belt Line, a multi-neighborhood project that connects the city with walkable trails, access to public transit, and a thriving public art program (Bush, 2014). There is always something new to discover in the Krog Street Tunnel, someone's artistry to see. Indeed, the tunnel and its changing façade are so well known in the community that there is [a Tumblr account](#) dedicated to it.



The images in this article were captured many months ago by Jonathan Splitlog, and the tunnel continues to change on a daily basis. While the visual contributions in the tunnel are debated as being art or not (that issue is a particularly long and global issue related to street art), there is no denying that what happens in the Krog Street Tunnel is a part of the community, and it contributes to the daily lives of those who pass by and through the tunnel. The columns in this photo declare that “You decide where it ends.” Residents and visitors can choose to zoom through the tunnel on their way to other destinations or they can pause and look, notice

and perceive what is there to see. The same could be said of education.



Kids and adults likewise move through the paces of attending and doing school: Arrive at the building. Go to class. Go to the next class. Go home. Do homework. Sleep. Repeat the next day. Educational researchers, however, opt to pause in school spaces to really notice what is happening and not happening among young people and teachers and administrators. In English education, researchers pay attention to the ways students talk about ideas, literature, writing. They watch how teachers set up lessons and then observe and record how students take on concepts through talking and writing activities (Christenbury, Bomer, & Smagorinsky, 2009).

In our experiences as teachers and researchers, we find that being able to see what happens in these spaces requires us to look carefully and think thoroughly about what we encounter. That is, we have to watch and record through notes or audio and video recordings to find the nuances of the action. Then we take those notes and recordings, and we examine them

through theoretical lenses focused on meaning making (Smagorinsky, 2001; Vygotsky, 1978; Wertsch, 1991), in order to better understand the interactions among students and teachers. We interview young people and teachers to understand what school means to them so that when we go back to our notes, recordings, and experiences, we can use the insights from the youth and adults in schools to inform our research.

Like artists who work on the placement of line with color and shape to evoke the ideas they imagine, we take a similar approach to educational research to understand the nuances of English classes. Put simply, what happens in schools when teachers and students read, write, and talk together is a dynamic exchange. To assume that what happens in schools can easily be summed up in a policy brief diminishes the action, thinking, talking, viewing, emotions, and learning that are possible. So, we look to our perceiving of the layered space of the Krog Street Tunnel as a metaphor for approaching research in ELA spaces.

As educators interested in the arts, we invest our research and scholarship, our teaching, and our outlook for education in the notion that complexity, surprise, and relationships matter (Eisner, 2002). We are not daunted by the messiness of what it means to learn and teach in spaces with adolescents and adults. We embrace the chaos, the quiet, the hard, and the easy so that we can build repertoires of understandings about the many ways in which human beings gather together in school spaces to learn and express ideas.



The Krog Street Tunnel is a palimpsest of ideas and images. The fleeting nature of the construction and covering over of the art means that, as an observer, it is necessary to really pay attention in the moment. Ashley Holmes (2014) argued that public art serves the important role of representing local issues and controversies, of fostering conversations and arguments, even if those arguments are emotional and unresolvable. To see the tunnel as a palimpsest requires an acknowledgement of the ideological nature of classrooms.

Street (1997, 2005) pointed out that literacy practices are ideological, that is, they are context- and person-specific, rather than being universal or autonomous, and these practices have complexities that are difficult to reduce or essentialize. Classrooms can be and are places that foster both conversations and arguments, and emotions are never absent from these learning spaces. To understand these layered, complex spaces then, involves seeing the context, the action, and the people.

Perceiving the Layered Qualities of Classrooms

This tunnel, like the classrooms in which we teach and learn, changes all the time. Every class period is a different interaction among teachers and students, a quality that Berliner (2014) eloquently explains cannot be adequately captured by statistical formulas. Berliner's point is that there are so many variables involved in understanding teaching and learning, that any one formula would never suffice to capture what he calls the exogenous variables in every classroom situation. These variables represent myriad relationships among students with each other, the teacher, their families, school administrators, and others who touch the lives of students. These complex relationships are part and parcel to the work that teachers and students do when they gather together to do school. Classes in particular are composed of moments of interactions among youth and teachers. These moments mean something and they are important. When we research them in English classrooms, we are looking for ways to capture these brief exchanges. Like seeing the art in the Krog Street Tunnel, we seek to capture the moments that are currently surfacing in classrooms.

We look at the Krog Street Tunnel as a visual example of how the layered qualities of classes provide only glimpses of what is happening on the surface. To know more about the tunnel, we can watch the tunnel over

time, interview the artists putting their marks and ideas on the walls. In learning about this space, we acknowledge the limited nature of what we can see and know (Battacharya, 2017; Smagorinsky, 2001). If we look at photographs of the tunnel from the past, we are necessarily looking through the lens of another artist, another viewer, and the affordances and constraints of the photography tool the artist used.

Our collaborator and photographer, Jonathan, provided one of the lenses through which we observed the tunnel and shaped our thoughts for this article. Our understandings are also narrowed and limited by our own affordances and constraints of culture, knowledge, and experience, the time we can spend in classrooms, the questions we ask in interviews, and the limits of what can and should be recorded in classroom observations and research discussions (Battacharya, 2017). The tunnel shows that it is possible to concentrate on what is present at a given moment, and also acknowledge that there is more beneath the surface.



There is more to know about this particular space than can be captured in one image taken on one day. By the same token, we know that there is more that can be known and learned from and about school, learning, and students than can be captured by one study, let alone by

current state-funded assessments that focus on standardized tests. Going further, we acknowledge that our understandings of classrooms, even if we spend a year or more in them, are also still limited by what we can see, hear, and ask. The reality is that what happens in English classes is changing and we can work on a piece of it—a photograph, a recording, a set of notes—and work at it we will.

Acknowledging the Palimpsest of School Spaces

What if we looked at schools, classrooms, and learning as dynamic spaces in which we might embrace what is currently happening, attending to the layers of action at play? What if we valued the choices that students and teachers make to determine what will be covered, what will be shaped into a new composition, and what will be abandoned for a later session? Like the artists who choose how their work appears in the tunnel, teachers and students make choices about how past moments shine through or frame activity in school. If we could see schools this way, that is, in a way that honored the immediacy and self-determination already present in the actions of teachers and students, then standardized testing would have a different value. Learning about what happens in classrooms requires more than a performance on a singular test or even a set of tests; what happens in classrooms requires time, recording, charting, and documentation through images, words, and numbers to be understood.

We look back to the tunnel for more inspiration for the next steps: *You decide where it ends*. We see these words as a call to action for us as researchers, as teachers, as learners. The artist issued an invitation to see what is available in that tunnel space and to decide what matters. Making choices like this is what researchers and teachers do all the time. We decide where it ends: when to conclude data collection, how many interviews to conduct. We seek the analysis that will lead to saturation and completeness, then decide when to take what we have learned and turn it into a paper. As teachers, we decide how much time to give an activity, when to end the conversation and move the ideas into a different activity.



Hopefully, we teach youth about the importance of deciding for themselves when to end their pursuits and begin others. And, with any luck, we offer them advice and support so that they, too, can decide and make choices for themselves. When does the story end? You decide when it ends. Where does the idea from the tunnel end? You decide where it ends. This statement and our view of research as a visual sense of seeing what rises to the top and what gets buried underneath in the tunnel is an invitation to act. You decide when it ends—the *it* is up to you as well. There is choice in this space. There is opportunity to make marks, speak up, and share ideas in this space. Classrooms are places where youth and teachers and researchers make their ideas more public, whether within the room alone or broadened to a larger audience.

What happens in schools is critically important. We value what we can gather from seeing English classes in the moment, in the chaos of human interaction, and in the ephemeral ways that teaching and learning are performed. The tunnel is a space that documents and hides and evolves to fit the parameters of the physical space in which it is located. It is colorful and provocative—it records traces of the people who paused to

linger there and leave a mark reflecting their thinking (Sumara, 1996). Like artists in the tunnel, teachers and students respond to each other, they create conversations that are messy and sometimes hard to understand. As researchers, we challenge ourselves to honor and embrace the shifting and difficult-to-capture space of schools. And we thank the artists in the tunnel for offering a way to frame this complex work.



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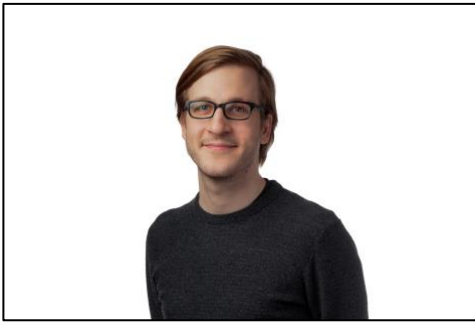
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