



A COMMUNITY ARTS INFORMED APPROACH

To Multimodal Storytelling

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Reflections from a

COMMUNITY ARTIST & EDUCATOR

Before pursuing a Masters of Teaching, I worked for almost ten years as an artist, facilitator and arts manager in the field of community arts, for organizations in Toronto (MABELLEarts, Jumblies Theatre, Making Room, Arts4All) and, occasionally, across Canada (Thinking Rock Community Arts, Vancouver Moving Theatre). Community arts is a practice of professional art-making that values both social and artistic outcomes (Hutcheson, 2017), engaging “non-artist’ community members at every step of the process (Thinking Rock Community Arts, n.d.). It is an interdisciplinary practice that at once engages and builds community (Jumblies Theatre, n.d.), often sparking projects in unexpected/under-served places, striving for active accessibility and inclusion, and - therefore - bringing together artists and community members across “real and perceived differences” (Toronto Arts Council, 2018).

In my experience, this work has the potential to be truly beautiful, surprising, exhausting, artistically striking and transformative. My love of community arts continues to power my educational work and research. In my application to OISE, I wrote:

“I believe that pursuing my Masters of Teaching with the sensibility and skills drawn from my professional experience as a community artist, will equip me to become a teacher who creates a neighbourhood-connective, community-driven, interdisciplinary, artistic learning environment for my students.”

I believe that a program built on values of critical literacy, is a pathway to achieve this goal, through a community arts-informed process.



photo courtesy of MABELLEarts

COMMUNITY ARTS & LITERACY

There are many arts practices that engage with community, but the practice of community arts that I am guided by grew out of the Popular Theatre and Collaborative Community Play movement (Howard, 2011), and has been recognised as a professional field by Canadian arts councils since the late 90's (Toronto Arts Council, 2018). There is a rich and varied practice of Community Arts in Ontario and Toronto: The Toronto Arts Council distributed more than \$1 million of funding to 78 community arts organizations and collectives in 2017 (Toronto Arts Council, 2018).

The content of community arts projects is often every day stories that reflect the lived reality, cultural practices or imagination, of participants, and "honours the perspectives, knowledge, stories, skills and cultural practices of community members." (Hutcheson, 2018, p. 6). This way of working is a critical literacy approach with the power to disrupt dominant narratives (Vasquez, 2013) through presenting, juxtaposing and celebrating many and varied voices.

Community artists enact many values shared by critical literacy approaches: including themselves in the process (with reflection on their own identity, and privilege), centring collaboration, creating multiple entry points, working across modes of expression, facilitating with flexibility/embracing an open-ended process, and embedding multiple perspectives in projects, through process and product. Hutcheson, 2018 & Vasquez,

2013). (My mentor, Leah Houston, of MABELLEarts, taught me that a community art project (whether it is performance, installation, festival, garden, or song) is best when what is created is unified by artistic vision, but in some way still makes visible the many hands that created it.

I believe that making art and telling stories in this way is a powerful critical literacy approach, which can be enacted in our classrooms and, when it reaches the broader community, can be a powerful tool for social change.

In this document, I present a case study: a community arts project, called Four Lands, conceived of by Jumblies Theatre and Ruth Howard, on which I was lucky to work in 2017. Four Lands has toured across Canada and been adapted for all ages: from pre-schoolers to seniors.

This case study presents an opportunity to explore the ways that these two practices (critical literacy and community arts) can facilitate meaningful, multimodal storytelling in a classroom, and use interdisciplinarity to expand literacy practice beyond perceived limitations (Lenters & Winters, 2013).

By no means is Four Lands the only community arts project you could undertake in your school. But, if you are as excited by community arts, critical literacy, and multimodal storytelling as I am, I hope this will serve as a guide and inspiration for first steps to implement these approaches in your own teaching practice.

TRY THIS: FOUR LANDS

"Imagine a surreal landscape filled with tiny forests, poems about heartbreak and hope, miniature braids of sweetgrass, and pocket-sized canoes."

Alana Forslund, 2016

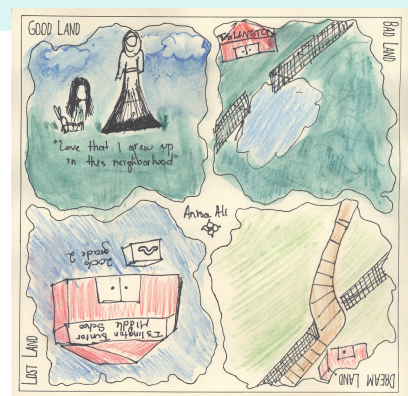
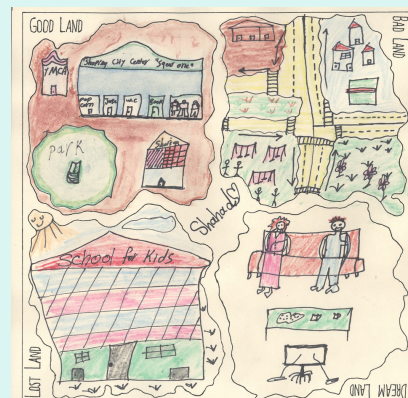
Four Lands is a touring community arts project, conceived by Jumblies Theatre: a multi-step, interdisciplinary arts process, that has been presented for and is adaptable to all ages and educational levels and contexts, including elementary classrooms.

This is a rich project for your students, offering an interactive, arts-infused, multimodal (Lenters & Winters, 2013), collaborative storytelling opportunity that brings together visual arts, oral storytelling, poetry, technology and performance.

Four Lands invites participants to image the land they occupy through four different lens: perception, memory, history, and imagination (Jumblies Theatre, 2016). Each lens reveals different stories: of the **good**

land (what we like), **bad land** (what we want to change) **lost land** (what we hold in our mind from other times and places) or **dream land** (what we imagine or wish for) (Art Gallery of Mississauga, 2018). The project captures community stories in response to these prompts, and weaves them together through installation.

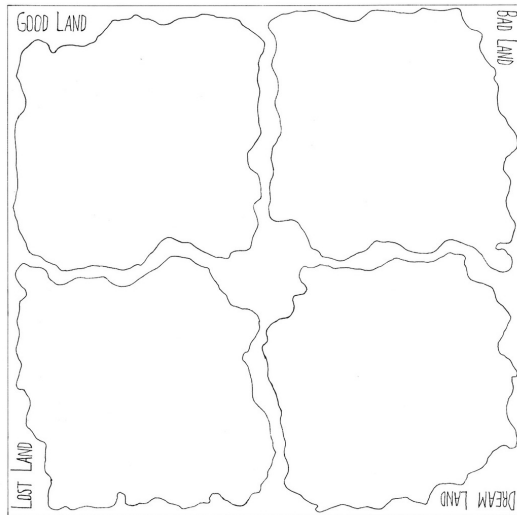
This process presents an opportunity for students to re-examine what they know from multiple and differing perspectives — an important critical practice (Vasquez et.al., 2013) — as well as question and shift the boundaries of what they know by encountering each others' stories and views. It acknowledges and celebrates the diversity of each students' funds of knowledge (Moll, 1992), while creating opportunity for connection and new learning.



FOUR LANDS: MULTI MODES

START BY LEARNING AND THINKING ABOUT THE PLACE YOU ARE:

- Take a walk through the school neighbourhood
- Invite a local elder or knowledge keeper to speak
- Use literature (see appendix pg 9 & 10)



EACH STUDENT FILLS OUT THE FOUR LAND TEMPLATE (LEFT)

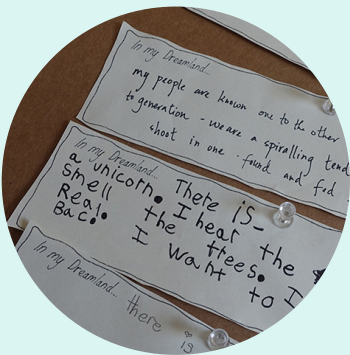
Encourage students to use images, text or a combination.

This project starts with considering the land you are on: what is there now, what was there before, and what might be. Subsequent activities can unfold to include any or all of the other following modes::

TEXT & POETRY

Writing prompts:
In my Good Land....
In my Bad Land....
In my Dream Land....
In my Lost Land...

Can be organized as an individual or collective poem, or expanded on to create descriptive texts. Text may be written or shared orally.



MINIATURE-MAKING

Each student chooses one of their four lands and depicts it in 3-D as a miniature, using found materials. Often this land is the one that will spark more detailed writing or storytelling.



COLLECTIVE STORY

Completed miniatures can be gathered into four distinct lands, to show an overall class perspective on Good Land, Bad Land, Dream Land and Lost Land. Oral or written responses and reflections may be guided by: finding similarities, differences and/or surprises.



RECORDED SOUND

Stories can be shared orally and recorded. Jumblies attached light-activated sound chips to the bottom of miniatures, so that recorded audio played when they were lifted. These sound chips are relatively affordable at about \$10/piece.



COMMUNITY ARTS & CRITICAL LITERACY

“To be a critical inquirer is to be collaborative, constantly examining what one knows from multiple perspectives.”

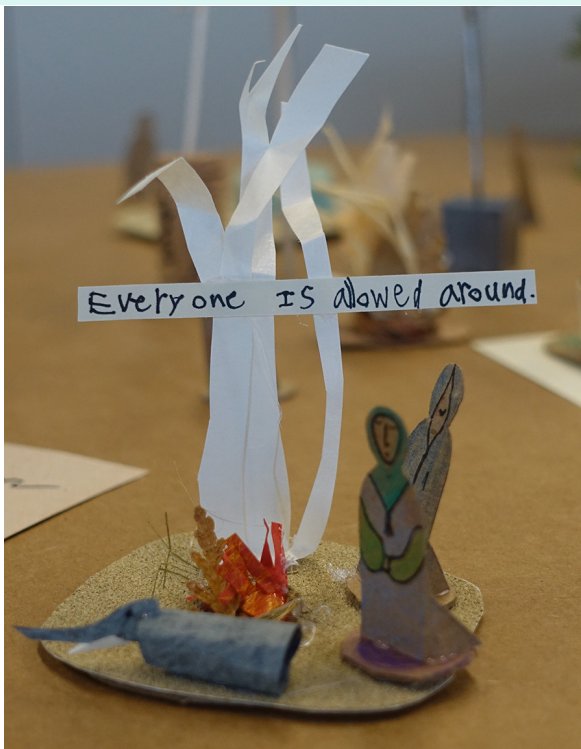
Vasquez et. al, 2013, p. 11

Four Lands is an example of a community arts project that aligns with a critical literacy approach, by exploring differing perspectives, and fostering active social practice (Vasquez, 2013). Through art- and story- making, it encourages those taking part to re-think their relationship to the land they are on, acknowledging what is erased, forgotten or lost, as well as noticing what is present and emergent, as part of the story of where we are.

Four Lands grew out of a multi-year project by Jumblies exploring the “Indigenous and layered histories and contemporary landscapes of the place called Toronto” (Jumblies, 2019). Jumblies brought together settler, newcomer and Indigenous artists, knowledge keepers and community members, many of whom played a key part in shaping the Four Lands process.

As a non-Indigenous Canadian educator, living on stolen land, my “teaching philosophy” (Vasquez et. al. 2013, p. 23) includes a responsibility to engage in anti-colonial practice in my life, work and classroom.

This imaginative, land-based activity offers multi entry-points for your learners to access a new way of thinking about the layered and complex identities of the places they inhabit and frequent. Facilitating this project with your class offers many opportunities not only to create rich and engaging multimodal strategies, but also to apply critical literacy approaches, by: exploring relationships to the colonized land we inhabit; creating connections to environmental education; finding and acknowledging points of similarity and difference in your classroom community; and potentially discovering areas of desired advocacy for change.



Considerations when planning a community arts project:

Who is in your “community”? Is there a way to connect your community arts project to participants beyond your classroom? Beyond your school? How can an arts-based process help your students engage with those who they might not otherwise?

If your project, like Four Lands, engages with local history, stories, or land, how can you make sure to represent Indigenous history and presence as part of the stories created? How can you forge connections to authentic voices, elders and knowledge keepers as part of your inquiry?

Educators should be critically and reflectively engaged with their own identity, privilege and power. How can you design your arts-based literacy project so that your perspectives are included alongside your students? How might this lead to new discoveries for you, as well as your students?

ART-MAKING, STORIES AND SOCIAL CHANGE



Like Critical Literacy, community arts is a "socially-minded" practice (Thinking Rock Community Arts, n.d.), with a commitment to a self-reflexivity, "inclusivity, participation, equity and social change" (Hutcheson, 2018. p. 6).

Lenters & Winters (2013)'s demonstrate the benefits of art-infused literacy instruction through their research into multimodal storytelling. Their emphasis on the benefit of creating and expressing with creative unpredictability, aligns with community arts' "open-ended process" (Hutcheson, 2017. p. 6), which allows for the unpredictability of multiple perspectives, varying abilities, diverse backgrounds, and authentic participation.

Engaging in a multimodal storytelling process can have significant benefits for your students (Lenters & Winters, 2013). But more than that, story-telling and community arts can themselves be forces for change. Ruth Howard (Jumblies Theatre) argues that community arts is "activism of form and relationships" (Howard, 2011, p. 7), a way of transforming a societal disconnect between art, self-expression, and community. By celebrating and centering our students stories' differences, connections, unpredictability and dissonances, we are engaging in a critical practice of, in a small but significant way, "understanding and transforming" our world (Vasquez et. al., 2013, p.19)

Recommended Further Reading:

- *Is Anyone Political Anymore?* Ruth Howard (2011)
- *Telling Stories to Change the World: Global Voices on the Power of Narrative to Build Community and Make Social Justice Claims.* Edited by Rickie Solinger, Madeline Fox, and Kayhan Irani (2008)
- *We did it Artfully, All of Us, Together. Let's do it artfully, all of us, together.* Sid Bobb (2011) (available Via Jumblies Theatre)
- *If This is Your Land, Where are Your Stories?*, J. Edward Chamberlin (2003)

ARTISTS IN THE CLASSROOM

Although there are rich possibilities for educators to adapt community arts projects for their classrooms, there is also great value in the artist-led aspect of this type of project. The leadership, vision and craft of professional artists is a significant element of community arts practice (Hutcheson, 2017). Lenters & Winters (2013) point out the impact on students of connecting to professional theatre artists as part of their multimodal process. As an educator, you may want to consider bringing an artist with experience in this practice into your classroom.

How to bring community artists into your school:

- **Take Artfare Essentials.** Jumblies offers an annual training in community arts practice. Educators can take the course to learn more about this work, and connect to artists. Find out more at: www.jumbliestheatre.org/jumblies/studio/artfare-essentials
- **Connect to other community artists and organizations.** Check out The Toronto (torontoartscouncil.org) or Ontario (www.arts.on.ca) Arts Council's list of Operating Clients, or the The Neighbourhood Arts Network's free directory of almost 2000 member arts organizations and individual artists with community arts practices (www.neighbourhoodartsnetwork.org)
- Take part in **tdsbCREATES**: "a four-week spring festival that includes artist residencies, mentorships and special arts presentation events.". Find out more here: <https://tinyurl.com/y4ytcflv>
- **Find an artist; write a grant with them!** The Ontario Arts Council funds partnerships between professional artists and Ontario school boards. Find out more here: <https://tinyurl.com/y324xzpt>



LITERATURE ABOUT THE LAND WE ARE ON

Suggested texts that could spark a Four Lands project



TINY, PERFECT THINGS

MH CLAK

"Today we keep our eyes open for tiny, perfect things..." An intergenerational, multi-racial family spend the day together, delighting in unexpected moments of beauty they discover around their urban neighbourhood: a flower growing through the pavement, a friendly neighbour's wave, a spider web. This book will encourage your students to look closely at, and think deeply about the places they frequent. This book could be followed by a neighbourhood walk, to launch the Four Lands project.

JUST A WALK & CHUCK IN THE CITY

JORDAN WHEELER

Chuck is a young boy whose walks keep turning into adventures! Both Just A Walk and Chuck in the City present stories of the possibilities and discoveries of walking and engaging with your surroundings - one in an urban and one in a rural setting. Jordan Wheeler is an award winning Cree author, who creates a playful and humorous invitation to explore your surroundings in new ways.

WHAT COLOUR IS THE WIND?

ANNE HERBAUTS

A blind child encounters a series of characters, who each inform him the colour of the wind, through the lens of their own life experience. The illustrations incorporate texture and some Braille, making this an accessible text that will encourage all students to think about multiple perspectives. Students can also use this text to think about the multi-sensory experiences of their Four Lands: what does your bad land smell like? What does your dream land feel like?

LITERATURE SUGGESTIONS CONT.



A COYOTE COLUMBUS STORY

TOMAS KING

Another way of introducing Four Lands is to start from teaching some of the colonial and Indigenous history of the land you are on. This way, this history enters into the content of the communal Four Lands in some ways, even if not all students reflect it in their stories. King's playful text retells the Columbus story from Coyote, the trickster's, perspective. This book depicts a story of colonization for young audiences, reinforces a theme of multiple perspectives, and encourages the questioning of dominant narratives.

MAYBE SOMETHING BEAUTIFUL

F. ISABEL CAMPOY AND THERESA HOWELL

Inspired by a true story of a mural project that built community in an unexpected place, this book imaginatively shares a real life example of how art can guide you to see and reimagine places you frequent in new ways, and that this can be a tool for social change. Your class can listen to a podcast featuring the book's illustrator, Rafael López, speaking about the community arts project that inspired this book, to help make the real life connection – <http://wp.me/p6TKmO-2MU>

TORONTO POETRY MAP

CURATED BY THE TORONTO PUBLIC LIBRARY
WWW.TORONTOPOETRY.CA

Although this is not strictly children's literature, many of the poetry selections included would be accessible to junior students. This map sorts Toronto poems by the neighbourhood they are about. This is an exciting resource for inquiry-minded students, who could use the map to explore their neighbourhood and city, not only through sensory walks, but through existing literature and writing. Writing by Indigenous poets is included.

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**PHOTOS BY LIAM COO &
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