

Art in Early Childhood

Mud Mess and Magic: building student teachers' confidence for art & the outdoors in early years

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ABSTRACT

This article explores making art outdoors as a resistance to a reduction in messy, outdoor play in our early years settings, schools and increasingly risk averse societies. As part of a small-scale Community of Practice research investigation into improving the confidence of student teachers to make a mess and brave the weather, the article argues for a relation with 'outerness', where both being outside and exploring natural materials in art can function as play partners in the creative process. Referencing Australian Aboriginal Dreaming art practices and those of British artists Andy Goldsworthy and Richard Long, we reflect on how students engage with natural features and materials in situ in the landscape of an urban British University campus and how they can overcome their fears and anxieties related to art. The findings of the study indicate that when knowledge is 'felt' rather than 'learnt', it operates at a deeper level than could ever be taught or 'explained', often expressed visually or through metaphor, emphasizing the felt perception that materials themselves are alive and can communicate as part of artistic processes and acts of co-creation.

childhood play and are in need of greater adult and child resilience to meet risk rather than avoid it.

Outdoor nature play

Studies such as Gill's (2007) are taking place worldwide and invariably support the benefits of going out to play. An American Institute for Research study (2005) 'Effects of Outdoor Education Programs for Children in California' claimed that children who have regular opportunities for free or unstructured play in the out-of-doors, demonstrate greater levels of creativity, cooperation, conflict resolution and leadership. Numerous models of forest schools from Scandinavia to Scotland connecting children's confidence and well being to outdoor learning and play and publications are increasingly popping up on topics such as learning outside the classroom, things to do with sticks, or demonstrating the merits of 'Dirty Teaching' (Roberston, 2014). In such studies, it is argued that natural places match children's ways of knowing in that they offer varied opportunities for adventure, construction, and re-invention. "The 'rough ground' aspects of natural places offer the 'qualities' of openness, diversity, manipulation, explorability, anonymity, and wildness. The indeterminacy of rough ground allows it to become a play-partner, like other forms of creative partnership: actress-audience, potter-clay, photographer-subject, painter-canvas. The exploring/creating child is not making 'art' so much as using the landscape as a medium for understanding the world" (Moore, cited in Trimble, 1994, p. 27).

Yet children are undoubtedly playing outside much less than their parents had. According to Rachel Sebba's research in Israel, 'In one generation the percentage of people who reported that the outdoors was the most influential environment of their childhood dropped from 96% to 46%.' (Sebba, 1991, p.4)

She argues that children who only experience the indoors are likely to grow up psychologically and physically detached from their environment. As a result they will develop a negative approach to the outside world rather than a positive and creative one. To paraphrase, the natural landscapes of childhood become the inner landscapes of adulthood. Sebba's work draws on much earlier thinking. Edith Cobb's extraordinary book 'The Ecology of Imagination in Childhood' (1969) takes a radical position on the development of genius through encounters with natural form. "Form is the magic of the world, as Dalcq has expressed in nature, play, art, or thought." (Dalcq cited in Cobb, p. 539). Referring closely to the science, literature and philosophy of her day, Cobb argues that, rather than using cognitive models to describe and understand children's thinking, we should consider the complexities of intuitive, instinctive models in our evolutionary survival, such as children demonstrate in their sensory play. Learning from the thing itself how things are allows us to think, adapt, evolve. Cobb writes lyrically about the child's innate propensity for sensory engagement; searching for a self in the world: "The child, like the poet, is his own instrument. His whole body, erotized and highly sensitized by the necessities of nurture and touch, is the tool of his mind, and serves with a passionate enjoyment in a creative engagement with the forces of nature." (Cobb, 1969, p.544).

Cobb(1969) the case of art historian Bernard Berenson (1865-1959) whose biography offers 'an exceptionally full and rich description of his discovery in early childhood of a sense of "Itness" as an integration with the ongoing process in nature. The position achieved by the child in this experience of "psychological equipoise" became a stabilizing influence, "a life-long goal, and also the basis of a highly skilful method of observing and learning" (p. 546) Cobb fluidly links artistic and intellectual sensitivity with orders of nature and methods of observing it. Her concluding statement is prophetic, given it was first published as early as 1959:

This point of view calls for a redefinition of human individuality, not only in terms of human relations, but also in terms of man's total relations with "outerness," with nature itself. Such a redefinition seems feasible in terms of the developing intellectual climate. The pattern of cultural evolution that has been long in the making is one in which the concept of ecology, the study of the relations between organisms and their total environment, will play a major part. (Cobb, 1969, p.547)

Cobb's belief in the power of growth and form as self-organizing patterns appealing to aesthetic sensibilities has been reiterated again and again in contemporary philosophical debates about creativity. De Landa's argument, for example, (2002) goes beyond deep analogy and can be developed even as far as contact with nature causes creativity, as if creative and natural processes share phenomenal similarity due to common origin or shared dynamic. It has been agreed that examining the creative process for its integral patterns reveals blocks, flows, the rhythms and destabilizations of frictions; all thought to be necessary breaks in the symmetry of stable but stagnant states. This suggests we recognize or share an "underlying homology with dynamic patterns—in which case our attraction to those patterns in the natural world cannot be dissociated from those within our own being." (DeLanda 2002, cited in Everitt, 2011, pp.94-95)

In many indigenous traditions, nature is at the centre of lived and spiritual experience. There has been a long connection between the child and nature, resurfacing strongly now in a time of perceived competing digital connection, growing urbanization and less unstructured outdoor play, perhaps not least for the stewardship issues to come in growing environmental crises. Richard Louv's terms 'nature-deficit disorder' or 'growing up denatured' (2010) are deliberately emotive; even melodramatic: something the child needs 'saving' from. Yet, it is this advocacy for the child or a kind of indulgence in child-metaphor (to stand for human plight)? Children's own lived realities change due to adult exposure to scare-and-warning stories, statistics and institutional interference, just as they always have. We also live in an age of excess: over-planning, health and safety, political and cultural caution against risk. The ethnographer Margaret Mead reviewing Edith Cobb's book in 1969, wrote of the terrible dangers of seeing new opportunities for learning as risk. As she puts it, "You are planning for opportunities to be brave and skilful. If you say you are talking about planned danger, that's like talking about divorce insurance. We don't say death insurance; we say life insurance." (Mead, 1969, p.24)

Life can be messy; art too, as there are unexpected challenges and environments, if one reads the word 'messy' as meaning disordered, mixed-up, plural. These are positive statements in relation to creativity, yet it was negative statements and attitudes that led us to reflect on teaching and learning via outdoor, messy art. Our students are trained to be Early Years teachers, so they will be models of creative arts practice for themselves, for children and with children. Yet they clearly suffer real insecurities about art, and anxieties about the potential 'mess' this may involve. This dilemma gave us the idea for a small-scale research project into our student experience, so that we might reach a better understanding of how to overcome their fears and allow them to over-ride any negativity they might meet in early years education settings.

Community of practice research

At Middlesex University, the teacher-training team is part of a Community of Practice research group exploring socio-constructivist or dialogic learning with the aim of co-educating culturally responsive teachers. We use Vygotskian ideas of language viewing works of art as symbol systems which can be internalised for the 'co-construction of knowledge' (Shor & Freiere, 1987) and 'Dialogic Inquiry' (Russell & Kelly, 2002) where research is an interacting dialogue process with implications for teacher and learner reflexivity. Our shared goal is not to answer all of our questions about dialogic learning and certainly not to project one monolithic view, but to consider how each of us interprets the model, puts it into practice and reflects on it, in collaboration with the student teachers in their own cultural context and with each placement experience.

Internationally, teacher-teachers' professional development in art does prioritise creative arts knowledge regardless of specialist education (such as is the practice in Finland and Sweden) and can reflect indigenous strengths in programs such as the Flying arts Alliance of Queensland, Australia. Regarding the teaching and learning context in England, Art is not on the core curriculum. Early Years student teachers only receive 3 or 5 sessions in total over their one year postgraduate or three year undergraduate program. What can we do in this short time? In 2013 we are moving to a slightly longer Expressive Arts module that we hope will expand the student experience of learning through art, and we decided to conduct some small-scale action type research into student responses. Our research questions were: 'can we build confidence in our future teachers to approach art more creatively and less fearfully?', 'Can sensory, expressive, creative development really develop language and thinking, and can it encourage culturally responsive teachers?'

Our research methods were collaborative and discursive (peer to peer, student making with tutor, interaction, reflection and evaluation) site-specific or situated pedagogies (such as taking place on the floor or outside), and where cultural activities and media are regarded as integral to the learning and research.

The researchers

A brief background on each of the authors is also relevant. One of us grew up in a gang of brothers who spent most of the daylight- and night-time if they could get away with it- down the woods outdoors, building or climbing things and mostly playing a competitive game of continuous risk called 'Dangerous Escapes'. Creativity was encouraged at home as a form of self-expression. When a Primary teacher, realized how much deep learning seemed to take place out of school settings and through the arts, further studied Literature and the Visual arts; metaphor in particular, and, after twenty years in teacher training, is firmly convinced in the pedagogic power of contextualized, material metaphor. The other author, likewise, grew up in a time and a place where it was not unusual to head out to play after breakfast and not return until 'tea time'. Her 'playground' included an old textile mill, a stretch of canal with a steep flight of locks and a disused railway line overgrown with Rosebay Willowherb and Buddleia (perfect den-making material). However, being born into an avid mountaineering family, hikes up peaks and down dales on a weekly basis in the Yorkshire wind and tundra took its toll – resulting in a healthy skepticism about the great outdoors in general – especially where the English weather is concerned. Having studied Fine Art and Photography – firmly indoors and frequently in a (warm) darkened room, she realized the empowering and transformative nature of engagement in the creative process, practiced both indoors and out within an urban context, and within and through the richly diverse cultural landscapes this setting presents. Working for twenty-five years as an arts practitioner and educator with children and young people in an urban setting, she is firmly convinced of the transformational qualities of arts practice in relation to the promotion of cultural democracy, the resonance of diverse voices, and the creative expression of personal and cultural identities.

So, as researchers we share an enthusiasm for the arts and we have separate and diverse experience of visual and metaphoric arts projects with early learners. In research terms, we should acknowledge a bias for the arts as a preferred form of teaching and learning. We have no intention of generalising our findings or engaging in self-deceptions about "evidence", but intend to keep the research deliberately local, practice-led, small-scale and discursive. Since we teach the students collaboratively, we hope to achieve a measure of objectivity through self-awareness and sensitivity in relation to our data. Dialogic research requires that you involve all parties with knowledge-building as a shared practice or praxis, leading ideally to 'the empowerment of the researched' (Lather, 1984).

Creativity

The scope for creativity is huge in the Early Years curriculum for England. 'Being imaginative' is explicitly encouraged as best practice in the statutory National framework, and the 2013 Early Years Foundation Stage Handbook finishes with the category 'Expressive arts and design ELG17 – Being imaginative', reminding the practitioner that for the purpose of assessing this Early Learning Goal: 'processes are more important than the finished product which need not necessarily occur... (and) the

child explores and experiments in a variety of imaginative ways in response to a range of creative stimuli. The child may use their prior knowledge and experience to express their ideas in original ways, making informed choices.' Lobbying bodies such as the Arts Council of Britain (2005) joined the chorus arguing for the "Creative Curriculum", where creativity is about connecting the previously unconnected in ways that are meaningful (Duffy, 1998) requiring time, inventiveness, curiosity, risk-taking and imagination.

We decided to take seriously student's phobias about art, and resist the mistaken assumption that because our student teachers have chosen to become early years specialists, they would "naturally" be attuned and comfortable with creative and outdoor educational practices. Their recorded statements suggest the contrary, in fact:

'When I was at Primary School I refused to get my hands dirty. It got to the point they called my parents in. This is a step out of my comfort zone. I'm still not confident – the thought of it just makes me feel ill - but I've got to get over it as I'll soon be teaching kids. Hopefully by the time I'm finished I'll love art.'

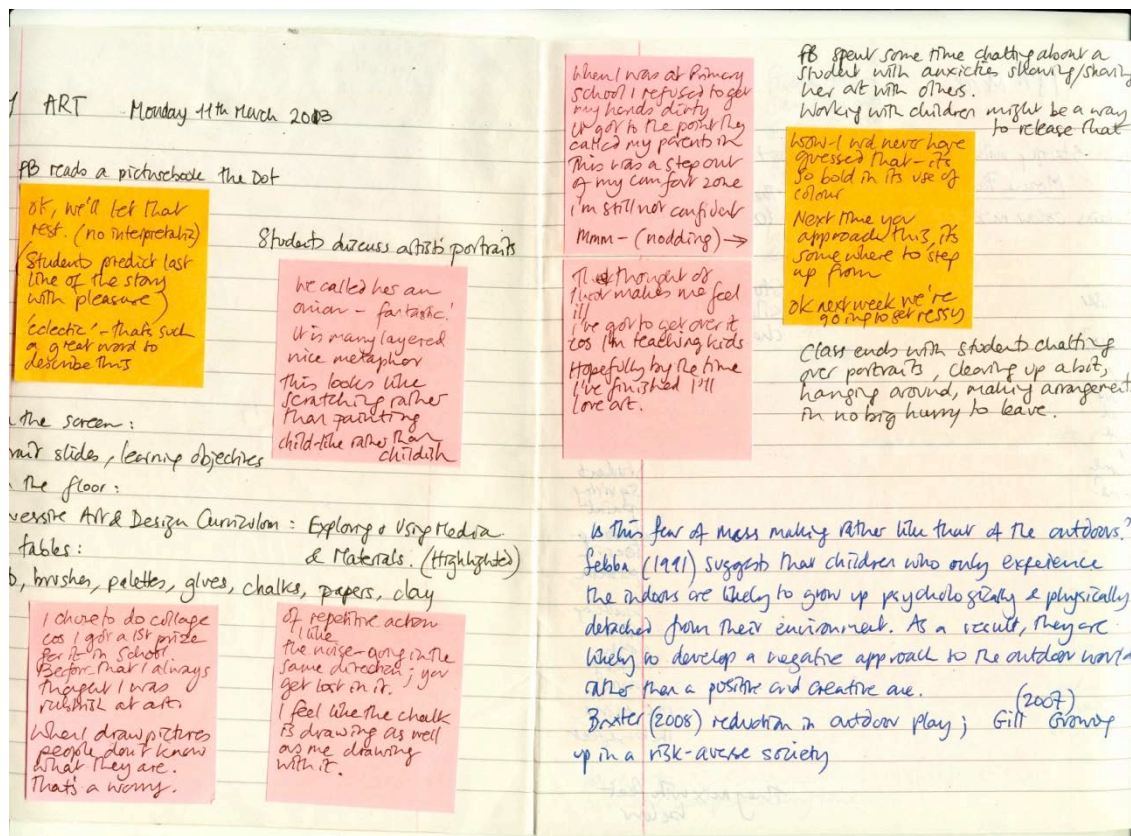


Figure 2 : Tutor observations and recordings of student activity and commentary as the session unfolds.

Attending an inner city University, many of our student teachers have grown up in urban environments and may well have had their own play restricted as part of the increasingly 'risk averse society' (Gill, 2007). They may well assume 'creativity' has a

relationship to 'natural' talent, or being 'gifted' in the arts, or that it is about teaching for and achieving finished art products rather than engaging in (messy) imaginative processes.

Art in the living landscape

Trying to address some of the students' reluctance and anxieties, we decided to refer to Australian Aboriginal Art and the Dreaming as a creative stimulus for students to explore making as storytelling. Aboriginal people often refer to land as 'country'. Anthropologist Deborah Bird Rose (1996) has emphasized its enormous metaphoric range of association:

People talk about country in the same way that they would talk about a person... People say that country knows, hears, smells, takes notice, takes care, is sorry or happy... country is a living entity with a yesterday, today and tomorrow, with a consciousness, and a will toward life. (p. 7)

The rationale for this was firstly because many of our students have not met these ancient but still lived cultural traditions before, although by now they are internationally recognizable. These particular art practices also presented rich possibilities for using a wide range of natural materials and story-mapping as part of the cultural and natural landscape. We also made connections between these thousands of years old indigenous Australian arts practices and those of contemporary British artists Andy Goldsworthy and Richard Long, whose work uses physical engagement with natural features and materials in situ in the landscape, such as stone arranging, for example. This work shares the impermanence of some Dreamtime practices such as sand paintings, where the artwork is ephemeral, transient, and can even be made 'on the move'.

At its most successful, my 'touch' looks into the heart of nature; most days I don't even get close. These things are all part of a transient process that I cannot understand unless my touch is also transient; only this way can the cycle remain unbroken and the process complete [Andy Goldsworthy, (1981-1986)]

"In the nature of things:
Art about mobility, lightness and freedom.
Simple creative acts of walking and marking
about place, locality, time, distance and measurement.
Works using raw materials and my human scale
in the reality of landscapes."

"The music of stones, paths of shared footmarks,
sleeping by the river's roar." [Richard Long, 2013]

It is important to stress that we do not encourage pastiche, or copying other artists. We would not presume to teach dot, rock or bark paintings. We avoid drawing anything figuratively and thus avoid the stress attached to being a "good drawer". We bring the students' attention to Dreamtime practices as creation belief-systems belonging to its

people and explore some of the work's characteristics, such as aerial perspective, use of local materials, symbol and motif. We make connections to play in response to the physical landscape, in particular how young children become engrossed – as described by Csikszentmihalyi's (1996) state of 'flow' – in the sensory possibilities of materials.

Ideas with freedom to move

We have undertaken an anti-individualist stance, encouraging organic, evolving, co-operating art making: to model how we expect the student teachers to work and play with children, allowing ideas and the freedom to move. The sessions involved collaborative work in order to create artworks and stories using natural materials and developing real-time storytelling 'events' in response to their immediate landscape. Each group co-created and performed one event, plus participating in and evaluating the others.

Our aims in working in this way were to avoid the idea of art as a discipline practiced and taught by specialists or as pastiche, or mimesis, go beyond pencils, pens or paint to sticks and stones, seeds, salt or spices, make artwork with natural materials in our landscapes, work with non-linear, non-figurative narrative forms for students of diverse cultural origins and encourage positive intercultural understandings create new starting points for art with young children of similar diversity

Pastiche is a very common form of art in British schools. Whilst imitation is of course a compliment, hundreds of young children's cheerful copies of Van Gogh's "Sunflowers" neatly double-mounted and displayed for inspection result in what Fredric Jameson (1998) calls 'blank parody' or 'dead language', stripped of its cultural, political or historical content. Cultural context is lost. Art resists homogeneity whilst educational pastiche runs the risk of replicating it.

Imitative learning is clearly part of how adults engage with young children, but as Gergely and Csibra (2013) have argued in relation to primate research, distinctions need to be made between cultural forms whose aspects are cognitively 'transparent' versus 'opaque' for the observational learner. Pastiche (when it is copying without critique) is a passive form of creativity, wrongly assuming a transparency where the original works are opaque. Blind imitation is necessarily limited to the surface elements of an artwork. Of course copying or imitative pedagogy has its place –in learning to speak, for example, but not, perhaps, in going on to play with language. Gergely and Csibra (2013) argue that we have a special kind of human-specific and inherited receptivity to benefit from such teaching in a shared human sensitivity from birth to directional and referential cues or signals and fast-mapping facility to new and relevant learning opportunities, so it seems particularly important to use these facilities creatively towards originality rather than plagiarism.

Importantly, Csikszentmihalyi's research of 1971 into originality found a positive relationship between 'discovery-oriented behaviour' at the problem-formulation stage and the originality, if not the craft, of creative art.

When being outdoors at our University campus, students were faced with what first seems quite a sterile, urban space. Eventually, after some embarrassment and awkwardness, in contact with their surroundings and left to their own devices, they began to play – pulling out dead branches, leaves and logs from carefully tidied piles and forming a messy log figure, using leaves to make an afro; carefully plaiting the leaves of a willow, creating trails of brightly coloured leaves to lead the passer-by along a secret path; everyone enjoying the 'transgression', the playfulness of the process, and the act of making. Essentially, the collaboration, the playfulness – being 'allowed' to play - drove the activity forward. That was exactly the model we want for student teachers to offer to future children.



Figure 3: Collaborative outdoor making on the University campus

On another occasion having to change rooms unexpectedly, we simply dumped a range of materials in a pile, so students had to rummage through and discover themselves what was possible. This resulted in much more dynamic relationship with the materials, discovering and discussing their properties and potential for symbolic use. The students knew they would make a piece that would eventually be unmade and re-made so that all materials needed to be recycled. The given materials were seeds, beans, stones, pebbles, grit, sand, salt or spices, they were meticulous about trying to conserve the materials separately once the work was dismantled.

Engaging with cultural sensitivities

When giving a paper at the 5th Art in Early Childhood conference in Cyprus, we were interested to have concerns expressed about the use of spices and foodstuffs. New Zealand colleagues explained that Māori conservation traditions had resulted in some early learning centers no longer using food materials as it could be considered culturally insensitive for those suffering food scarcity. Perhaps rather than banning resources and processed materials related to injustices of wealth and shortage (such as water, paper or foodstuffs) we need to acknowledge that there are used and discarded every day in many settings. Finite planet resources do mean we cannot justify decorative uses such as pasta necklaces and if we do use food in educational contexts, we are honour-bound to engage with its politics such as global anxieties about over-productivity and shortage. This is not an easy task for teachers to communicate or early years children to understand, but it is surely a challenge worth tackling, beyond the notion of a simple 'ban'. For example, we found that using spices such as paprika, tumeric and cinnamon evoked familiar associations that helped students talk easily and enthusiastically about their own cultural contexts. The sensory associations were so culturally diverse and became so much part of each story that other materials simply could not have 'spoken' in the same way. No other method could replicate its immediate, rich depth, and no pedagogy could replace its non-literal effects and affects.

Similarly, one of the group pieces used a motif made of salt to indicate a mythical character's dried tears, and we would argue it was only because of salt's strong symbolic associations with myth and fairy tale, this metaphor resonated so strongly with the audience.



Figure 4 : Student documentation of mythical narratives in the landscape

However, there are unquestionable responsibilities carried in modeling and as a result of attending the conference and reflecting since, one of the improvements we plan to make for this coming year's art early years program is to engage more fully with the politics of our materials. We want to discuss Aboriginal traditions of using blood or saliva to mix colours, the histories and cost of spice or salt trades, explore different cultural traditions such as the playful Indian Holi festival where people are covered in coloured pigment and spice and ask our students how they feel about using food for art, thereby co-constructing critical positions on the topic.

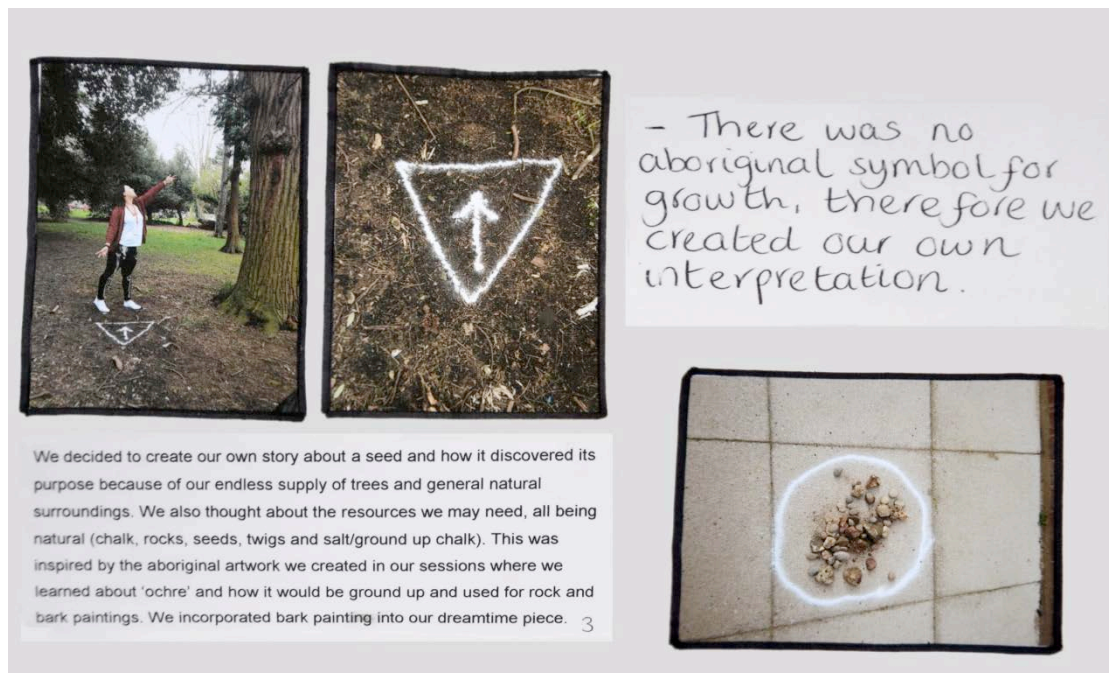


Figure 5: Student teacher Dreamtime narratives in natural media

Learning felt through the arts

In conclusion, what did we find? It 'felt' like learning. We found students that seemed most creative when the sessions were: resource, not teacher-led (using props, natural media, settings and each-other) process-driven learning (transient, dismantled, thrown away artworks) free-flow play (haphazard, risky, accidental, unplanned choices) all of which resulted in co-construction – or 'co-creation' to use Anne Dunlop's term) of experiential knowledge that is 'felt' rather than 'learnt'; at a deeper level than could ever be taught or 'explained'.

It was exciting to discover that the urban spaces of our North University campus can act as a repository of stories and creativity, implying the model can realistically be transferred to the inner city settings our student teachers and newly qualified teachers will encounter. Making creative use of urban spaces as the 'natural world' to city dwellers is our next educational and cultural challenge.

One of the most rewarding findings is that students' fears of mess and art outdoors can be replaced with positive enjoyment within a supportive environment that values their art making, though we aim for still greater levels of physical boldness. Next time we plan to complete a tutor piece of work that can only be seen up a tree, thereby ensuring the curious make the effort to climb it!

A further reward was that the final assessments demonstrated attitude change. Students completed portfolios that included critical reading, art materials and documentation of events, all within their own free means of creative expression. Their work shows the learning has been an active, social process. The students have shown real independence in questioning constructively what creativity; outdoor art and play actually might be, demonstrating that conceptual change is part of creativity. These assignments have surpassed our expectations in their invention and diversity and our University team and external examiners have noted the significant improvement in results. Having the institutional 'nerve' to go beyond the written essay has been a creative experience for the staff, and the patchwork portfolio has become the model for future assignments.



Figure 6: Student teacher portfolios showing diversity of engagement

These early, relatively anecdotal findings have suggested more questions, as is the nature of Community of Practice research. When cultural activities and media are regarded as integral to the learning and research, we have found that site-specific or situated art making do allow students to make deep connections across cultural and creative expression, but exactly how they do this- and how our socio-constructivist

pedagogies encourage it- needs further investigation. We plan to survey our own childhood experiences of outdoor, messy art play, and to follow case study students into their first jobs to research how they put their ideas into practice. By this method of going back into the past and forward into the future we travel farther and take our collaborative and discursive interactions deeper, with more reflection and evaluation informing our findings.

It is important to recognize and value the role of metaphor in both the making of art and describing what has occurred, and how it feels. The use of metaphor in critical writing and discussion about art can provide a platform for imaginative responses and generate expressive writing about art. The French philosopher Paul Ricouer takes a phenomenological approach, arguing that the metaphorical process is cognition, imagination and feeling, and stressing that metaphor is a living phenomena (hence the title of his book “La Métaphore vive” (1975) because of its creative capacity for seeing the world anew. Ricouer is theorizing what Aboriginal artistic practices communicate through their metaphoric interpretations of living country. Likewise, when our students expressed themselves through metaphor, their imagery emphasized the felt perception that materials themselves have life and can communicate as part of artistic processes and acts of co-creation.

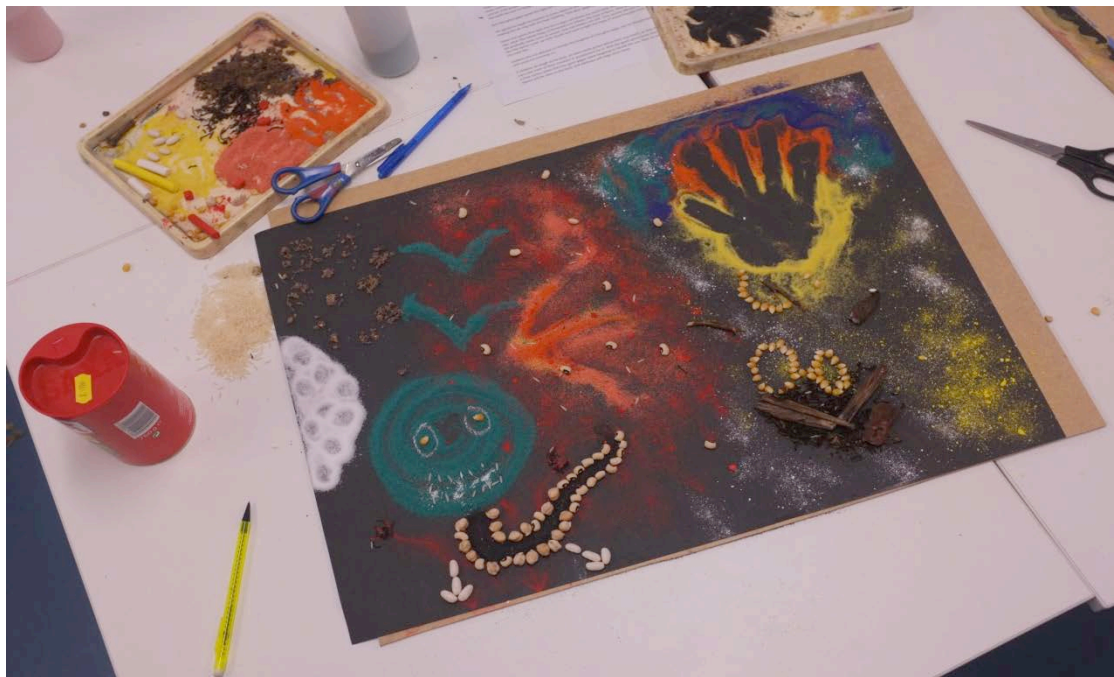


Figure 7: “It feels like the chalk is drawing and talking as well as me using the chalk”

If student teachers of art for the early years can develop the confidence to think and feel creatively, we hope they will be more open to outdoor artistic adventures and that they will have the courage and conviction to make a truly glorious mess.

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