

3. The Project Approach To Instruction

The Project Approach, Historica Fairs, and Documentation as "Visible Listening"
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Observation

Much of the Historica Fair work recently undertaken by the Centre for Research on Multiple Literacies (at UCC) has been informed by documentation strategies first developed in Reggio Emilia Schools in Italy. There, it seems, the project approach to education--where "deep learning" and multidisciplinary inquiry is encouraged through extended class projects--is taken for granted.

In Canada the project approach has been championed by, most notably, Sylvia Chard at the University of Alberta: see her homepage at <http://www.project-approach.com/> According to Chard, "Both research and developments in education have recently led to instructional innovations designed to make the classroom into a learning environment which is more responsive to the varying learning needs and interests of individual children. For example, there is increasing curriculum integration: continuity between the children's learning in the different subjects. There is more opportunity to relate home and school learning. There is concern for memorable learning as well as memorized learning. Children are expected to work cooperatively on complex and open-ended tasks as well as follow instructions in step by step learning. The project approach provides one way to introduce a wider range of learning opportunities into the classroom."

Historica Fairs provide a very public and highly successful example of the project approach at work--a program encouraging in-depth investigations that are both personally meaningful and scaffolded by teachers and the community. As Lillian Katz has said, "The goal of a project is to learn more about the topic rather than to seek right answers to questions posed by the teacher." The project approach takes research--and children as researchers--seriously.

A key way for teachers to scaffold individual and group projects is through "documentation." Our understanding of documentation relies heavily on the Reggio experience, where the role of documentation is rooted in educational theory and metaphor. Children are regarded as inherently competent, as active builders of knowledge from birth. Not empty containers, children are seen as creative individuals, available to interpret the world around them. Reggio teachers speak of the children's "right" to have this awareness recognized—and about the teachers' responsibility to be curious about the child's awareness. The teacher's role, then, is (1) to recognize and respect children's learning strategies and experiences, and (2) to support children's learning processes. Rather than impose adult ways of knowing, the teachers seek to scaffold learning by making visible the children's developing awareness, their chance discoveries and interpretations (including their intellectual, perceptual, emotional, social, and physical responses).

This exercise in "Self" reflection promotes the kind of metacognitive awareness that we know precedes emergent reading and writing—and likely all other areas of significant learning.

The documentation begins with observation. The teachers construct, often in conversation and collaboration with the children, contexts conducive to learning, in-depth projects where discovery of awareness takes place. Once the project is set in motion by the teacher, observations take place spontaneously in natural contexts: here the teachers have a dual role, co-creating the context but also participating in the context with the children. The teacher takes notes and observes, and then extracts from the observations elements that allow interaction. Again, the preferred interaction is that which encourages self-reflection and supports each child's process of constructing awareness.

Interpretation

The Reggio teachers speak of observation as "containing interpretation": background knowledge

guides what we see and the meaning we bring to our observations. Here teachers remind themselves “not to notice only what the children don't know”; they look for individual strategies, remain open to surprise. The second stage of the interpretive process inevitably involves documentation, where the transcriptions and photographs are reviewed and shared with colleagues. Just as the children are encouraged to revisit their experiences via the documentation, so the teachers collectively interpret the data, going back over what has been jointly experienced and seeking insights into specific forms of learning. Though we don't have a tradition of such collaborative teaching in Canadian schools, *Historica Fairs* could provide a ready vehicle.

Documentation is the public face of the Reggio project approach. It begins with the gathering of documents—notes, pictures, photographs, etc., providing a record of the process that can be reviewed, discussed, and used as the basis for further project planning. Documentation provides visible traces that support the learning process and allow the immediate environment to speak. The children interpret the documents, review, remember, and become drawn into the planning of new learning situations. It is a community celebration of the power of narrative.

Documentation

According to the Reggio philosophy, one principal goal of documentation is to “protect the children's words and images” by preserving their authenticity—even any initial disorder and untidiness. Documentation captures a work in progress, allowing the personality of the participants to come through.

Formally, as the “100 Languages of Children Exhibition” (an art exhibition documenting the work of Reggio preschool children) displays, the Reggio teachers have opted for a “high art” presentation style, standardizing the position of the titles and images to provide a coherent—that is, predictable—narrative. White backgrounds and black lettering is preferred; the left side of the panel is saved for commentary, generally drawn from the children's own words; the images are arranged to the right—providing a guide or template, but one, as the teachers explain, that “can be betrayed.”

When computer technology is employed—scanned images, facimile objects—the teachers are careful not to distort or manipulate what they see as “the quality or presence of the real objects,” the children's drawings, sculptures, and so on. Wherever possible, they want to create exhibits that represent the presence of original objects. Such a process—one of sensitive observation, creative discovery, careful selection, and faithful representation—requires fierce listening from the teachers.

The resulting documentation occupies a space between the vernacular expression of the children and the high art, academically-informed perspectives of the teachers. The objects of mass and popular culture—the Fisher-Price kitchens, Little Tikes table toys, wagons, and Disney icons—so familiar in North American pre-school settings, are virtually invisible in the Reggio schools: mass produced toys, board games, and climbing centres are replaced by hand-made objects, specially designed for the space and projects. It is as if the cultural static—the white noise of mass and popular culture—has been reduced, filtered out of the learning environment, creating a place for careful attention to original expression.

Our work with the Centre for Research on Multiple Literacies has involved developing and practising strategies that make the learning process more visible—for school-aged students engaged in the National Heritage Fair and for older students, who are encouraged to use documentation as a journaling technique, a way to make visible their own learning and composing processes. We see *Historica Projects* as wonderful opportunities for teachers to validate student research by honouring (documenting) the research journey.