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Puppet Don't Have Legs! Dinosaurs have digits! Using the Dramatic and Media Arts to Deepen Knowledge across Content Areas

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Abstract

The dramatic and media arts afford opportunities for students to respond to children's literature in new and innovative ways, encouraging spaces of co-authorship and multimodality. Drawing upon the fields of New Literacy Studies, multimodality and democratic authorship to enhance children's experience with literature, this paper compares two small studies—both of which used arts and media-based resources. In this study we examined how grades four and five students from two North American countries use the dramatic and media arts to co-author responses to literature (fiction/nonfiction texts) and explored how these resources affected their content area learning. Results revealed that the process of socially, modally and critically exploring literature not only deepened students' content area understandings, it gave these participants opportunities to freely negotiate and voice their opinions, ultimately creating more equitable working spaces for everyone involved.

It has been known for some time that the arts, whether dramatic, media, visual, musical, or dance related, have had the potential to deepen students' literary understandings (Crumpler, 2005; Giguere, 2005; Wilhelm, 1997). For example, several researchers have demonstrated that the arts can improve reading comprehension or writing composition (Dyson, 1997; Winters, 2013). Moreover the dramatic and media arts are identified in and across communities as a recognizable part of students' lives—from dance lessons, to video games, to movies—yet the arts are still not part of sustained practice for many students within educational settings (Elder, 2010; Hennessy, Rolfe, & Chedzoy, 2001).

Drama, dance, music, visual and media arts continue to be marginalized due to increased budget cuts, insufficient resources and spaces, lack of instructor training/expertise, as well as perceptions that the arts are frivolous or less important than other subjects. Despite research that shows the educational value of the arts (listed above), some educators continue to ignore the arts or use these creative forms just to reward students for doing their “real school work”. This is problematic if the intent is to support students’ sustained and authentic engagement within elementary classrooms.

Drawing upon the fields of New Literacy Studies, multimodalities, and democratic authorship, this paper compares two previously conducted studies by the authors. Specifically, it explores how small groups of grades four and five students from Canada and the United States use the dramatic and media arts—in a sustained way —to author collaboratively. During this project the students co-authored responses that deepened their understandings of literature (fiction and nonfiction texts) and content area knowledge. Here, we not only highlight these expanded understandings, but also explore the critical/social negotiations that underscore these students’ learning. Our inquiry raises the following central questions: 1) How do elementary students socially and critically negotiate their thinking when using multiple modes of representation within the dramatic and media arts? 2) How do these processes of negotiation shape children’s participation in literature circle discussions, as well as their access to children’s literature and content area knowledge? For this paper, we draw from Kress (2003) in defining *modes* as semiotic resources for communication/meaning-making (e.g., images, spoken language, written language, gestures). Multimodality then, refers to the application of more than one mode for the purposes of communication or meaning making. For example, the creators of graphic novels use a variety of modes to communicate, including the drawn pictures, the written

narrative, and the formatted typography and layout. These layered semiotic resources (e.g., images, speech bubbles, frames), create a range of interactive meanings for readers, each relying on the other modes.

Theoretical Framework

New Literacy Studies

New Literacy Studies, an area of educational research in the field of literacy, suggests that all decision-making and knowledge construction in and across situational contexts is ideological and social (Barton, Hamilton, Ivanic, 2000; Gee, 1996; Street, 1995). New Literacy Studies researchers also propose that all meaning making, regardless of the mode of communication (e.g., digital, embodied, written), is simultaneously shaped by the participants' beliefs, historical contexts, cultures, and notions of the world (Barton et al., 2000; Pahl & Rowsell, 2012). Furthermore, meanings that are authored (created or interpreted) by participants are layered in modal, social, and critical ways (Winters, 2009). In other words writing and editing are rarely straightforward, but rather dialogic—recursive and re-negotiated (Winters & Vratulis, 2012).

Many teachers of new literacies have recognized that in today's world, students need to move away from writing as individualized practice to authoring as a social, iterative, fluid set of practices (Pahl & Rowsell, 2012). Few educators have realized, however, the ways that students compose, edit modal texts, and socially negotiate within collaborative settings when they use multimodal forms, including the power relations that critically position them (e.g., Lensmire, 1997; Winters & Vratulis, 2012).

Multimodalities

All literacies are "social technologies" (Tuman, 1992, p. 6), including the dramatic and media arts. Using various modalities and technologies to communicate meaning is not new. People have historically used various modes and technologies (from cave paintings and drums to keyboards and ipads) to represent, and communicate meaning. Certainly, continuities between print and the arts merit exploration, yet artistic forms of communication also rely on other modalities too, such as images, gestures, layouts, sound, each holding their own affordances and opportunities for access and knowledge (Eisner, 1998).

The dramatic and the media arts allow for the inclusion and enhancement of oral cultures, collaboration, and embodiment while still drawing from and extending the possibilities of print culture. This may be one reason why these communicative forms integrate well with children's literature and content area instruction. For instance, an autobiography can be scripted, performed, and then put on a website with an option for the reader to visually and aurally engage. These unique features of the dramatic and digital realms allow for the merging of modal literacies for the purpose of creating innovative forms of meaning making and expression.

The impact of today's varied technologies ultimately repositions all children as valuable co-authors. Not only can these youth showcase their strengths through alphabetic representation, but they can also disseminate multimedia broadly and immediately through a variety of digital and social networks. Hence, multimodal authorship is no longer individualized or narrowly defined—it now extends beyond notions of just reading and writing print to include all modes of representation (Pahl & Rowsell, 2012). Authorship is collaborative, fluid, iterative, and at times even fragmented (Luce-Kapler, 2006). Authors can choose how to position themselves and make their work public, choosing new possibilities for collaborative expression.

Democratic Authorship

In this paper, distinctions between embodied, digital, and print culture become evident as students gain authority and claim ownership over the literature, even within processes of constructing playbuilding and stop-motion animation. Children are sometimes uncertain of how to socially negotiate processes of decision-making for constructing democratic authorship (Dobson & Vratulis, 2008). Moreover, scholars are not always aware of or explicit about the ways children's socio-critical processes inform learning. Democratic authorship refers to the notion that words are not static (Barnett, 2005) because words no longer belong to a sole author of a text as readers can now enter into a text and manipulate and re-conceptualize it using a myriad of digital technologies (Barnett, 2005). For instance, wiki spaces allow the merger of roles between reader and writer so that the writer's role is entirely redefined as a collaborative effort by all those who participate on the wiki (Vratulis & Dobson, 2008); the voice of authority is then distributed to all collaborators and not just an elite few (Kahn & Kelner, 2005). This is what O'Reilly (2004) refers to as the *architecture of participation* creating opportunities for democratic authorship. Democratic authorship is about participation and is "oriented toward distributed authorship and collaboration" (Alexander, 2006, p. 32).

Research Contexts and Project Design

In this paper the authors contrast two qualitative, exploratory studies, using a comparative case illustration approach. The first study looks at a playbuilding project that took place in a school setting over a summer in Western Canada. Three elementary school girls and two boys (grades 4-5; 3 Asian and 2 Aboriginal students), all on free and reduced lunch—identifying their low socio-economic status—used children's literature (fiction and poetry) to construct a play that was performed for other campers, parents, and staff. This educational setting, though not

considered summer school, was established to provide a safe haven for students and to ensure that they did not fall behind academically over the summer months. The content area for this project was literacy and the language arts.

The second study took place within a Michigan school district. Eighteen boys and four girls (all grade 5; all African American), 90% of whom were on free and reduced lunch—again identifying their low socio-economic status—used children's literature (non-fiction) to construct stop-motion animation projects as part of their language arts unit. The content for this study was also literacy and the language arts, although students were encouraged to engage with science and social studies content as well and use an interdisciplinary model of learning. These were both small studies, which used the arts and media-based resource to enhance children's experience with literature.

Methodology and Method

In both cases, a qualitative, exploratory multi-case study design was used, allowing for the exploration of complex phenomena within each context (Stake, 1995). Crabtree & Miller (1999) assert that this type of design allows the researcher to work closely with participants in order to describe their views of reality and better understand participant decision-making and actions while encouraging participants to tell their stories.

In both studies, multiple data sources were collected, analyzed and merged (field notes, photos, video and audio recordings, sample documents, focus groups, and interviews). Ethics approval for the reproduction of the photos was given in both case studies. Parent consent and children's assent forms were filled out, granting the authors permission to reproduce and share images of their projects. Consent was granted to use quotations from participants as long as pseudonyms were used for the purpose of anonymity.

Focus groups and interviews were also digitally recorded and analyzed. Both authors assumed a researcher role during their respective studies while also serving as a facilitator and guide when needed. New literacy studies, multimodalities, and democratic authorship were all themes discussed by the authors before coding data in answering the target research questions.

Literature was used as a pre-text and as a resource for content area research and expression in both studies. In the first study, students were asked to form groups and brainstorm a variety of topics and decide on one. The instructor then wrote their topics on the board. During another class session students were invited to browse literature (i.e., fiction and poetry) about their topic. After looking through a variety of books and other resources, such as, magazines, they could keep or tweak their topic. Students were then given time to research their topic, find content they would like to use for their projects, decide on poems or stories that related to their lives, and start identifying examples and concepts they would like to share with their peers through drama.

For the second study, the process was similar. Students formed groups and brainstormed topics; they recorded these topics on poster paper, browsed non-fiction texts on the topics they chose, and then modified their topics accordingly. This sharing time gave students chances to identify facts and determine what would be included in each frame, such as visuals, sound effects, movement, and written text. Next, they storyboarded each frame, including visuals, sound effects, print, and narration, before starting to actually build their stop-motion animation projects.

In both studies, students were then asked to brainstorm about and choose a topic, and then collect materials requisite for the completion of their projects. Next, students in both studies created a model text (a script, scenes, settings, labels, dialogue, and sound effects) to share with

their peers. The art-making processes, both dramatic and media-based, used during both studies were an integral, necessary, and sustained part of their projects, rather than an add-on or reward.

Students in the first study then organized the order of their scenes. For instance, they created transitions, composed music, and added props. The intent was to bring authenticity to the literature they were reading. As mentioned above, the process of storyboarding had already taken place for the second group.

Both groups then shared their art with parents, teachers and other students. In both cases, a celebration was held to showcase student work. As a final follow-up, interviews and focus group sessions were run in each of the studies. Students from the two sites were also required to complete written reflections of their processes.

Case Illustrations

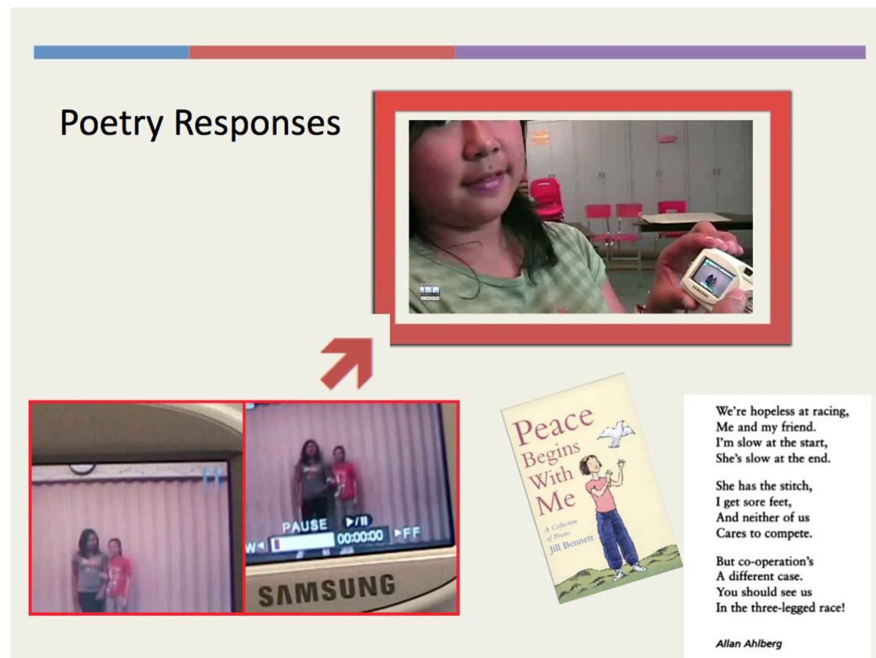
Study #1

After deciding on a theme, the students began building scenes for their play. At first they directly translated the words from a book into a reader's theatre piece (i.e., an "I'll say this and you say that" approach). This simple translation, when filmed and played back, seemed boring and flat to the students. They made comments like, "We need to do more things," and "I don't see what's happening..." (Field notes, 2008). These statements revealed: 1) the students struggled to internalize the written text (i.e., to visualize the setting and understand the character's actions and motivations); and 2) students were unclear of how to use drama to create a lived, embodied scene rather than simply acting out "talking heads".

Later, when the students were interviewed, they explained that they understood the picture books and poems as "just books" or isolated texts, but had no idea how to make the literature feel like a "real play that somebody would want to watch" (Field notes, 2008).

Since they initially chose to stand still and simply deliver the lines, the modes they were using, including speech and digital recording, afforded only small snippets of interaction and very little emotional engagement to the literature (See Figure 1). Further, in regards to literacy content knowledge, without movement and vocal play the students were merely comprehending on a literal level (considering questions such as: What are the characters saying? Who are the characters?), rather than a global level (How can I interpret and connect with these characters? How might I visualize the scenes? How are the characters feeling?). It is interesting to note that each group began building their scenes using this flattened and literal "talking heads" approach.

Figure 1-First Attempts Using Media and Dramatic Arts



Wanting more for their audiences, the students began incorporating more materials and modes of representation (e.g., musical instruments, puppets, paintings). Immediately they noticed a difference, both as authors and audience members. Their authorship became, in the words of Sharon, "more interesting" and "more fun" (Field notes, 2008). Partially, they were responding

to the affordances of each mode (see Figure 2). For example, the bigger movements afforded gestures, postures, and facial expressions and offered more characterization. The paintings gave them chances to better understand their settings, as well as the moods of their narrative.

Figure 2: Playbuilding, Take Two!

By making their work more modal, participants were deepening their literary constructions and gaining access to some of the ways the poet and illustrator might have envisioned the poem. But also, they were beginning to co-author an entirely new text (i.e., a play) by making connections to the literature and content area knowledge, and also with each other. In other words, they were moving away from authoring as an individualized practice and moving toward authoring as a social, iterative, fluid practice (Reference withheld). Additionally,

their authorship was becoming more aesthetic and imaginative; it was becoming artful! The dramatic and the media arts allowed for the inclusion of oral cultures, embodiment, and replay while still drawing from and extending the possibilities of the printed literature.

At the same time, the students now had more to negotiate. When opinions arose, they had to defend their modal choices. For example, one child wanted to use puppets for the Three Legged Race scene. Another wanted to use movement. "But the puppets have no legs!" she argued. "We can do the Old Ships poem with puppets, but we need legs for a three-legged race." These negotiations were brought up again during the interviews and final focus groups as points of deepened collaboration and understanding. Students felt that the opportunity to "do drama together, rather than simply read the book", helped them build connections to their characters, to their audience, and most importantly to each other.

Sharon:

> I didn't really know at the beginning how to make a play. I just thought you chose the parts and then said the words. But that was so boring. No one would want to see that! But it was when the actions were added th...then I knew how to get inside the author's head and really get what the poem was saying. Or at least what it meant for me (Interview #3, 2008).

Lisa:

> Sometimes we argued about how it should be. I want it this way or whatever, but we all wanted to put on a great show so that's why we had to figure it out. And so we did and it was a great show! (Interview #4, 2008)

The playbuilding and digital recording processes challenged students as they tried to negotiate their own vision with their peers. The students argued and felt frustrated at times; however, they

also felt engaged with the art-making process and connected to one another. Overall, integrating the arts not only improved student authentic engagement with literature, but deepened their content area knowledge of literacy too. By the end, all of the students could articulate the global understandings they had constructed, such as: connecting to their characters, feeling the poems' or storybooks' moods, knowing how the plot developed, and so forth.

Study #2

The second study focused on how students modally, socially and critically constructed slowmation projects. One moment of negotiation occurred when groups of students were asked to represent their ideas in the 2-dimensional story frame. At this point, groups had already identified the materials and resources they would include in each frame of their stop-motion projects.

Students each held firmly engrained ideas about what to include in each frame. At times, this resulted in arguments amongst group members where they could not agree. For instance, there were several students who felt strongly that literal information (facts) should always be represented in writing. Phillip argued, "You never...like...know what is going to happen if you narrate it. What if it doesn't play?" Amber responded, "Everyone gets writing. They [the readers] will understand." Other students really tried to ensure that they were considering other modes beyond just print alone. As Keiria argued, "We aren't writing a book report. We can't just like write it then cut it up in the frames. We have ta, I don't know; figure out what we wanna say another way. "

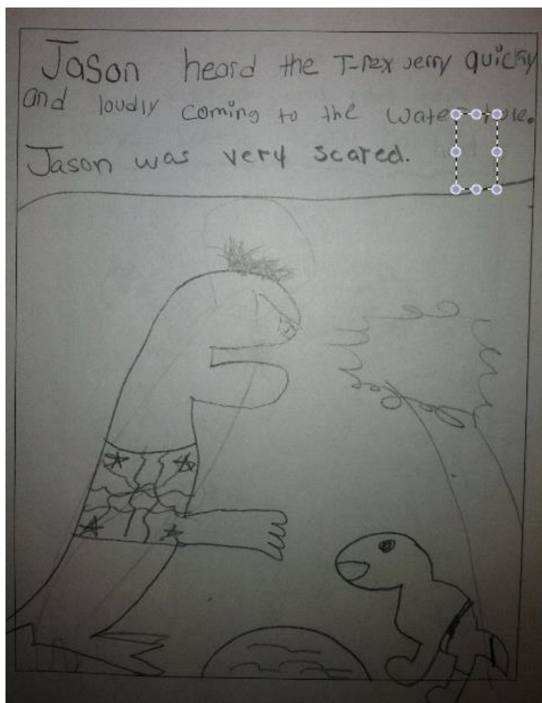
Even though the students had studied non-fiction literature, these comments suggested that some students continued to view the written word and visual representation as existing in opposition, as opposed to on a synergistic continuum whereby modes inform each other, layer,

and merge. Jessica stated, "The other stuff is extras. Everyone can read the information." Jessica's comment provoked Josep, "It ain't extra. It is what we are trying to say."

There were also students who understood more intuitively that the purpose of the stop motion project was to think beyond simple decoding; these global thinkers wanted to engage with the project in an entirely new way. Josep explained, "Yeah, like remember we aren't just including the info. We have to be able to say why we picked it, you know?" Josep understood the idea of "showing, not telling" — a concept that professional authors discuss. This was a new way of learning for some students. Emily asked, "How do we do that with pictures, though?"

Jessica was picking up on this concept too. Consider figure 3 (below):

Figure 3. Showing, Not Telling



In this frame Jessica is trying to represent the following three facts about the T-Rex: 1) they are top of the food chain, 2) they are meat eaters, and 3) they sometimes hunt by waterholes because that is where animals go to drink. At first, Jessica wanted to represent these facts by listing them

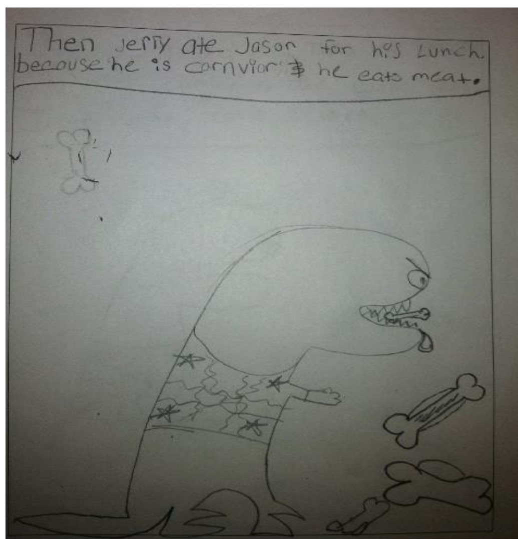
as literal points in each frame. Then, Jacob recommended they change to a more narrative form. "This will make it easier for the kids to read, too."

The facts were then translated into the following caption: "Jason heard the T-Rex very quickly and loudly coming to the hole. Jason was very scared." This genre switch deepened students' interpretation of the literature as it forced the students to synthesize and represent information in a new way — a way that was more accessible to their audience.

While they eventually agreed that translating their facts into a narrative would benefit readers, they argued about the form of this narrative (e.g., dialogue boxes, script, an omniscient narrator). After much debate, they decided on captions.

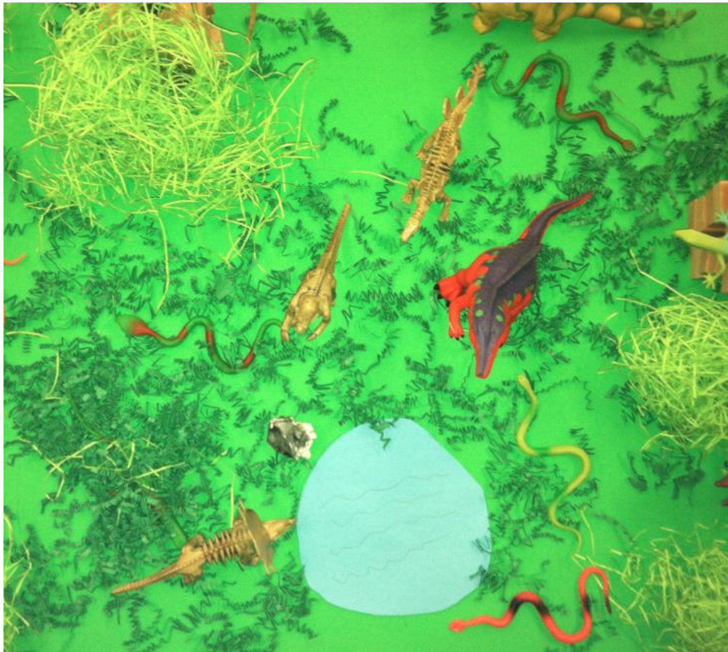
Another decision-making moment came when the group tried to determine if the T-Rex is a predator or scavenger; students read just as many informational texts supporting each theory. After much debate, students decided that the visual would just show the T-Rex licking the bones of the already eaten animal. Observe that in Figure 4, the caption states that the T-Rex is a carnivore, but in the visual all you can see are the bones. The reader is left uncertain as to whether the T-Rex hunts or scavenges for food.

Figure 4: A Predator or a Scavenger?



Reviewing the picture Karmi felt “it just doesn’t feel like a dinosaur is about to get eaten.” Amanda agreed, “If I were watching this as a movie, I would expect to hear jungle sounds, dinosaur growling, and stuff.” The group decided they needed to include these additional modes of communication in order to highlight the dangers of a jungle, and the ferociousness of these animals; they also wanted to create authentic dinosaur noises. They knew that the T-Rex sounded different than a Stegosaurus, for instance. Jeremy stated, “We have to make sure that it is the right kind of growl. I am sure they all made different noises. Where can we find that out?” To ensure that of the information they communicated was true to life, students created the following scene:

Figure 5: Three-Dimensional Renderings



This scene (Figure 5) represented ideas from each group member, showcasing their understanding of the plants, environment, animals that would feed at the watering hole, but most

importantly, the authenticity of the scene. Andrea stated, "It's better now...feels like you are there, with the growling." This multimodal, three-dimensional rendering helped them unpack and represent the information. Labels identified the animals and visuals highlighted the shapes, spaces, and the environment. Sound effects replicating the growls of the different animals were also included, heightening for their audience the authentic experience.

Finally, the greatest debate amongst these group members was about accurately representing these dinosaurs. For instance, when students started labeling their animated scenes they felt proud of all the vocabulary they were learning. However, there was one student who wanted the dinosaur to be more animated: moving and talking as the story unfolded. She wanted the caption to read, "He raised his fingers and claws." There was ongoing debate and confusion about whether dinosaurs had fingers. Another student, Kristie, concluded, "We have to be able to read the picture. It has to be right [correct]. Dinosaurs have digits!"

Findings

Both studies gave students sustained opportunities to modally, socially, and critically explore literature in and across content areas. The arts deepened their literary understandings by providing affordances and possibilities for representing the printed material in new ways. For example, in Study 1 students moved away from more traditional, individualized writing processes (i.e., creating their own scenes or reader's theatre script where one students simply writes information in a "You say this and I'll say that" way) and shifted towards modal co-authorship—devising and sharing the ownership of the play. Similarly in Study 2, completing this slowmation media arts project required students to transition from cutting and pasting (creating an individual craft) to co-authoring a collaborative project, wherein the content felt

authentic. In both studies, students worked together, invested in the artistic process, and hence brought additional meanings to their tasks.

In both studies, students would argue to defend their choices. Although chaotic at times, these debates became powerful vehicles for students to advocate their positions and rationalize their thinking processes. For example, in Study 1 a student felt puppets could effectively represent the poem. Yet, another student defended the poem's content against the choice of puppets, stressing that the poem was about legs, and "puppets do not have legs!" (Sharon, field notes, 2008). Study 2 demonstrated similar results when one student wanted to personify the dinosaur and give it fingers. Another student argued, "Dinosaurs have digits!" (Kristi, field notes, 2008). Ultimately, discussions such as these helped the students shape deeper comprehension of the literature's content and the students' modal co-authorship.

Dramatic and media arts in the larger projects strengthened participants' understandings of literature and content area knowledge in other ways too. In both studies, students were given authentic tasks to create. Instead of reading the literature as isolated artifacts that were chosen by the teacher, students used the poems, narratives, and non-fiction texts as resources. Furthermore, using the arts allowed the children to self-select, negotiate, and design their own opportunities for learning—literature in this way became the catalyst for student-driven inquiry and co-authorship.

Conclusions

This paper provides a new perspective on a traditional topic—the efficacy of arts education. What is unique about these two studies is that students were able to negotiate different 'entry points' for literature and content area knowledge. Students across contexts continually

melded and integrated modes, and at the same time, students using the arts relied on each other for the construction of their art.

Throughout this wider project, comprised of dual studies, authorship has been shown to be an iterative and spiraling process (Reference withheld), whereby all contributors have a voice. This project demonstrates that authorship does not need to be determined by merely conventional notions of linear page-bound text (Luce-Kapler & Dobson, 2005). Rather, art enables students opportunities for choice, demonstrating the continuity between a varieties of modes, including print, embodiment, digital technologies, and several other communicative resources. Dramatic and media art liberates student expression by affording students choices, authenticity, and opportunities for collaborative engagement.

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