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INTR 3B05
March 22nd, 2012

ADEL Journal Entry No. 6.

The first of three studio tours where I would be given the opportunity to teach, turned out to be a much more typical assistant-styled session. Dierdra was an extremely organized EO, and arrived with typed notes on how she ran the Creativity Challenge. While it was a bit disappointing to only be left with administrative duties, including organizing and handing out supplies, cleaning up, and providing feedback to the school group, this session was the first to sincerely approach the ideas of conservation in her teaching. From the beginning, Dierdra really emphasized the “challenge” of Creativity Challenge.

Another major note about her teaching style was how effectively she adapted her behavior to the group dynamic. The fourth graders we had that morning were somewhat slow to start, and were visibly unmoved by Brian Jungen slides that Dierdra presented to them (a first!). Instead, Dierdra created a very kinesthetic learning environment. Attention was brought to her with both oral commands, and by placing both hands on heads. During the warm ups, she made a point of getting the students to lift up their hands as soon as the time limit was up.

The second half of the session proved to be the most interesting part of the morning, because while conserving the materials she gave out to students was important, she shifted the focus of the studio away from environmental/social justice issues to issues of narrative. Students presented their “interests and hobbies” with subjects ranging from their favourite sports, to a love of nature, and numerous shipwreck/oil spill dioramas (no doubt inspired by the upcoming re-release of Titanic).

I had mixed feelings about this decision. In theory at least, I felt that even younger grades such as the grade fours are highly cognizant of their wider social environment. Even if all their opinions have not been formed, I feel that art making is a valuable tool for helping a student display, share, challenge, and begin practicing the critical thinking process so important to their development as socially conscious adults. However, I have discovered that in reality, giving students the task of creating artworks on an issue such as global climate change tends to backfire into lots of the expected images of trees, flowers, and comparative polluted landscapes vs. healthy ones. I think the primary reason why environmentalism as a social issue has become a hot button issue to the point where everyone seems to know something, but none of these facts add up to a larger connected picture of the planet we live on. Not only does a lack of discourse leads to stereotypical, often culturally discouraging imagery (in both advertising and children’s drawings alike), but gives everyone less agency to solve these problems. Fortunately, I think there are many possible solutions for a lesson plan.

An obvious one would be an information session and group discussion about how seemingly unrelated issues such as deforestation’s impact on global warming can be compounded by the de-oxygenation of the world’s oceans. Likewise, it may be highly important to show students how small actions such as over-fertilizing your lawn at home may lead to a nasty algal bloom in the lake near your house.

An environmental bent in a curriculum may also be combined with one of Canadian identity.
Both issue seems so vulnerable to the



lazy borrowing of widespread images, that making the issue of climate change local heightens the awareness of it. Likewise, the environment is one of the few shared parts of a multiplicitous, multi-cultural Canadian identity, hence a student who may feel uncomfortable talking about their identity in class may find something more intriguing in the notion of how our landscapes are often cultural constructions.

Lastly, a curriculum with a combined focus of environmental awareness with narrative possibilities can be achieved with an activity to create an imaginative, funny, or even impossible “fixer” for an environmental problem. For example, a crazy Dr. Seuss styled machine which combs carbon particles out of the atmosphere. Such a project could be extremely engaging and fun for many students, while its ridiculousness may also be a poignant reminder to them how real solutions to environmental problems may be more to do with proactive solutions than reactive ones. The work of Bill

Burns, particularly his adorable animal-sized protective gear for creatures living in warzones, would be a great reference.