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Performative Inquiry: Arresting the Villains in  
Jack & the Beanstalk

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## Abstract

From flower arranging to negotiating with a willful cow, an educator stumbles across the threshold into a performative space of learning that invites her to pay attention to what matters when a teacher encounters her students. Performative inquiry in the classroom brings to the curriculum a spirit and practice of inquiry, critical and creative thinking and reflection, and embodied engagement. The ambition is not to simply “put on a play” or expose children to the arts, but to use the arts as an active means of critical and creative inquiry in pedagogical engagements across the curriculum.

Performative inquiry provides a theoretical underpinning that supports the use of the arts as a viable vehicle for learning across the curriculum. Performative inquiry in the classroom calls for cross-curricular explorations that are embodied, relational, and intimate. Bringing performative inquiry into science, language arts, social sciences, or other disciplines opens new ways of working with students that encourage student agency and empowerment. Integrating the arts through performative inquiry engages students in meaningful curricular explorations, thus enlarging the space of the possible.

Drawing on David Appelbaum's conceptualization of the stop, a moment of risk, a moment of opportunity, the author calls us to attention, to listen to the embodied texts that we create through our engagement in the arts. It is in the listening, the critical and creative thinking, and the reflection that is our inquiry, that performative inquiry in the classroom offers a powerful means of engaging students in meaningful ways of learning through the arts.

Creating an imaginary world through role drama—working with visualizations, tableaux, soundscapes, and improvisation—invite metaphor, symbolism, imagery, relational engagement and communal awareness and reflection. These are the possible embodied literary engagements that performative inquiry brings to the pedagogical spaces of the Secondary English classroom. Performative inquiry encourages a rewriting of curricular texts that perform us—texts that have as yet to be imagined. Performative inquiry encourages a critical reading and re/interpretation of how we come to understand our worlds of relationship and engagement.

We come, each of us, with our own questions, biases, motivations, experiences, cultural and social perspectives; but we come also to engage critically, reflectively, responsively, playfully, creatively. We write together an emergent new curricular text of engagement; a performative text that lends itself to interpretation, reflection, revision—a gift of presence and curiosity permitted by an embodied communal inquiry that engages us intimately.

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#### Biography

Lynn Fels joined the Faculty of Education at Simon Fraser University, as Assistant Professor in September 2007. *Exploring Curriculum: Performative Inquiry, Role Drama and Learning*, co-authored with George Belliveau, was published January 2008 by Pacific Education

Press. She is currently the Academic Editor of an open-access journal, Educational Insights, [www.educationalinsights.ca](http://www.educationalinsights.ca). Her research interests are arts education, performative inquiry, curriculum, writing, and the interplay between technology and performance.

**Keywords:** performative inquiry, curriculum, learning, role drama, integration, arts education

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*these are our possibilities—*

*listen...*

*in our breathing together*

*we realize our text(s).*

I have a confession. On my first day of teaching in a secondary school in Kimberley, British Columbia, I donned a kimono and introduced haiku to my astonished twelfth grade students. My introduction to the poetic form began with a lesson on flower arranging. Thirty-two years later, I am, of course, appalled at my transgression. A recent transplant from Ontario, I had had no knowledge of the World War II relocation of Japanese-Canadian citizens from the West coast, nor had I had any concept at the time of cultural appropriation. Nor was I the only one guilty! The town itself was undergoing its own dubious cultural reinvention—a Bavarian facelift was in full tilt. After that fateful class, I remember watching the local church steeple being removed by crane and replaced by an architectural revisioning that held the hopes of new fortunes in a fading economy.

My haiku lesson was the first occasion of my crossing borders to explore learning through the arts across the curriculum. Unable at the time to find a teaching position, I spent several years as a freelance performing arts educator. My specialty was introducing performing arts into different subject areas: math, science, language arts, social studies. I created a play that subversively taught the times tables to fourth grade students. I co-investigated air pressure with third grade students through the reenactment of famous moments of flight, after which the students created an original music composition using homemade wind instruments of assorted water-filled bottles. A fifth grade class and I integrated medieval history and notions of chivalry into our puppet play.

Then one day, a second grade teacher phones me, "We're doing a unit on fairytales. Would you be interested in doing a play with my students?" We choose Jack and the Beanstalk as our fairytale. I give Jack a sister in the interests of gender equity and, with the students gathered around me on the carpet, I tell them the story and assign roles. Working without a script, we begin to improvise the first scene together. I ask each child to decide what his or her character would say or do, and slowly our play unfolds. I turn my attention to the cow.

“Now listen, you’re a cow, and Jack and Jill have just told you that they are going to sell you at the market. What would you say to them?”

“Moo?”

“Well, yes, that’s good. What else? Remember you are a talking cow.”

“I’d say, ummm...I know! ‘What?! You’re going to take me to the market and sell me?! Why ME?! Why don’t you sell the rooster?’”

“But we don’t have a rooster!” I remind him. “Didn’t you listen to the story?”

“Then let’s get one! Who wants to be the rooster?”

“I do.” “Me!” “Pick me!” Fifteen hands wave frantically in the air, including the cow’s.

“No rooster,” I insist. “Stick to the story that I told you earlier.”

Exhausted, two hours later, we come to the improvisation of the final scene.

“Here’s the situation.” I tell them. “Jack and Jill have cut down the Beanstalk. The giant is sprawled dead on the ground. The mother hugs Jack and Jill. Now how shall we end the play?”

I am met with shrugs and puzzled looks. No one offers any ideas. It is too close to lunch. So I decide to provide the ending myself. I am, after all, the theater expert.

“Okay, here’s what will happen. You’ll all hold hands and dance around the giant and sing, ‘Hurray, hurray, the giant’s dead, now we can all go home to bed!’”

I demonstrate with great enthusiasm. The students stare uncertainly at me, the thought “what a stupid idea!” clearly expressed on their faces. And then one student—the one that the teacher had warned me about, “If he gives you any trouble, just send him back to the classroom”—tugs at my sleeve.

“I have an idea, he says.

“What?” I snap. I am disappointed that my great idea has been rejected.

“I’ll be the police officer who comes to arrest Jack and Jill and their mother for KILLING THE GIANT!”

*A police officer in a fairytale?!?!?*

*My immediate response is to say NO!*

*—but the word hangs unspoken between us...*

I was faced with what David Appelbaum (1995) calls a “stop”—*a moment of risk, a moment of opportunity*. A stop is a moment that calls us to attention. A stop signals a new awareness of possibility, a recognition of oneself in relation to others and one’s location, as if for the first time. A stop reminds us—as individuals, as educators—how we are shaped by our habits of action, language, authority, location, and context. A stop invites us to see and respond differently to our curricular worlds of engagement.

... *and I wonder*

*who is writing this story? Whose story is this?*

My student’s proposal to “bring in the cops” makes visible the invisible script that I am writing with the children and insists on a new form of engagement: one of collaboration, reciprocity, mindful listening—requiring that I pay attention to a child’s reimagining of the curriculum-as-is. We are held suspended in a moment of natality (Arendt, 1958). A child’s arrival into our curricular presence calls us to attention. How shall we, how shall I, receive this newcomer?

An eight-year old boy, this student whom the teacher had warned me about—with good cause, I now understand—brings to our fairytale play complex issues of social justice,



responsibility, complicity, consequences. He interrupts my conventional “and they lived happily-ever-after” ending and opens a new landscape of inquiry where we come face to face with moral choices of action and must ask—as I did within that moment of the stop—who are we in relationship with others? The critical question for me, as an educator holding the institutional authority of curriculum, becomes, within this moment of interruption, “How do I respond? How do we now engage?”

“Great idea!” I say, after a moment’s hesitation. “Let’s try it and see what happens...”

*It is a moment of release, it is a moment of hope.*

*I am, as Maxine Greene would suggest, wide-awake...*

On opening night, our play is received with a thunderstorm of applause. What is it that I, as educator, may learn within this moment of recognition? I am being offered an opportunity to engage in our shared curriculum in a new way, if I am willing or able to listen, and to respond from a renewed positioning. And, in doing so, together the students and I created an embodied script that celebrated the participation and voice of each individual student. We have, through this process of inquiry, become engaged in a shared reciprocity that

encourages students to re-imagine a curriculum that is responsive to each student's presence. As curriculum theorists, Brent Davis, Dennis Sumara, and Tom Kieran remind us, "Just as I am shaped by my location, my location is shaped by my presence" (1996, 157). Our presence, or absence, and that of our students, matters.

Curriculum ceases to be a thing, and it is more than a process. It becomes a verb, an action, a social practice, a private meaning, and a public hope. Curriculum is not just the site of our labour, it becomes the product of our labour, changing as we are changed by it.

(Pinar et. al, 1995, 848)

Following that pivotal moment, I returned to university for doctoral studies, and in the journey since, have come to recognize anew the importance of creating pedagogical spaces for students, of all levels and ages, where they become co-creators and collaborators in the "scripting" of our shared curriculum. We engage in an emergent curriculum that listens, and responds to, as theater director Eugenio Barba advises, "not walls of cement, but...the melodies of your temperatures" (1995, 162). I am, in this work, interested in exploring what we might call curricular border-crossings that invite students to

interweave lived experience, performative texts, and shared engagement through the arts across the curriculum.

At university, I asked the question, "What happens when you bring drama and storytelling into the science classroom?" and after three years of research in a science education class, I conceptualized and articulated performative inquiry as a research methodology that creates curricular spaces of learning. (Fels and Stothers, 1996; Fels, 1998, 1999). Performative inquiry is a research methodology that uses the arts as a process or medium of research, and has been used by researchers in a variety of locations such as arts education, curriculum, technology, counseling, and mental health (See, for example, Peterson, 2007; Noble, 2006; Giard, 2005; Beare, 2002).

Performative inquiry in the classroom brings to the curriculum a spirit and practice of inquiry, critical and creative thinking and reflection, and embodied engagement. The ambition is not simply to "put on a play" or expose children to the arts, but to use the arts as an active means of critical and creative inquiry in pedagogical engagements across the curriculum. Performative inquiry provides a theoretical underpinning that supports the use of the arts as a viable vehicle for learning across the curriculum. Performative inquiry in the classroom calls for cross-curricular explorations that are embodied, relational, and intimate. Bringing performative inquiry into science,

language arts, social sciences, or other disciplines opens new ways of working with students that encourage student agency and empowerment. Integrating the arts through performative inquiry engages students in meaningful curricular explorations, thus “enlarging the space of the possible” (Sumara & Davis, 1997, p. 299).

For example, in my work with Dr. Karen Meyer as we explored science education through drama, we became involved in a curricular hybrid of engagement that could be named as neither drama nor science. We drew on both science and arts activities to investigate the phenomena of light, sound and motion; our in-class science experiments, simulations, storytelling, and use of dramatic scenes to explain scientific concepts eventually led to the production of our student-written play called, “Light, Sound, Movin’ Around: What are Monsters Made Of?” which was performed for 400 elementary school children. Three days later, classroom teachers sent our student teachers thank you notes written by their students with detailed drawings illustrating how the positioning of lights affects the size of shadows—information that the children had gleaned from the play (Fels and Meyer, 1998, 1997). As one child was overheard saying when leaving the theater, “I don’t know whether what we just saw was science or a play!” Learning through the arts across the curriculum within the parameters of performative inquiry becomes a seamless

engagement of inquiry, critical and creative thinking, and meaningful reflection.

Early in my doctoral studies, my thesis supervisor, Dr. Patrick Verriour, introduced me to role drama (Tarlington and Verriour, 1995), and my students and I have since used role drama with students to investigate a variety of issues such as democracy, empowerment, communal responsibility, and performative literacy. Engaging in role drama collectively allows individuals to shrug off their roles as teachers and students and take on new roles—as writers, as politicians, as architects, as characters within a novel, as economists dealing with a financial crisis. The possibilities are endless. Within a given context and environment, participants are called upon in role to take action, to make decisions, and resolve problems. In role, students and teacher explore issues or situations through a variety of perspectives or lens of interest, motivations and agendas. Together, they engage in *an ongoing bringing forth of a world through the process of living itself,*” (Maturana & Varela, 1992: 11, my italics) which, in turn, reveals and explores an embodied language of desire, presence, absence, integrity, betrayal, intimacy, curiosity within human relationships and collective and individual action. Through being in role, and upon reflection, we ask questions about our choices of action, and engage

together to inquiry critically and creatively into the consequences of those actions.

How might, for example, performative inquiry through role drama be used in a secondary English classroom? Students could be called upon to be in role as editors of a publishing firm to plan an anthology of poems or short stories. What arguments would they put forward for their proposed selections? What audience of readers would they target? When reflecting on their final selections, students may be asked, whose voices are absent? Have issues of diversity, geographical locale, and gender been addressed? Or, when studying Shakespeare, students may seek to discover through improvisation the accusations and arguments of Julius Caesar's killers, those proud Roman senators, when plotting his murder. Students may in role explore what advice a king's advisors give when the prince announces his plans to marry a commoner. Or in role as journalists, health officials, or company public relations employees, students might write news releases about alleged health risks caused by a local industry. Or in role as members of different interest groups, they might attend a council meeting to protest or support the building of a new mall or windmill energy plant on the outskirts of a rural town. Or in role as advertisers, students may design an advertising campaign and presentation for a given product.

These examples illustrate how performative inquiry may cross curricular borders, slipping off the bondage of strict disciplines and thus bringing forth critical concerns, social, political, and economic issues, and inter-relational connections that a regular lecture or textbook may fail to evoke. What is critical to understand, when speaking of performative inquiry in the classroom, is that students are not reenacting scenes from a play or story, they are inquiring into what might have happened, the hidden motivations, the unsaid arguments, or relationships that happen between the lines of the script, the story, or the event being investigated.

*... the role of imagination is not to resolve, not to point the way, not to improve. It is to awaken, to disclose the ordinarily unseen, unheard, and unexpected.*

—Greene, 1995

And it is through their actions, and interactions, in role that students may come, collectively and individually, to new learning, to a new literacy of engagement and expression. The embodied hermeneutic readings or understandings brought to the shared experience and reflection through role drama (and other arts activities), leads to the development of a performative literacy that

enables students to understand, critique, and engage anew within performative and lived worlds of interaction.

Creating an imaginary world through role drama—working with visualizations, tableaux, soundscapes, and improvisation—invites metaphor, symbolism, imagery, relational engagement and communal awareness and reflection. These are the possible embodied literary engagements that performative inquiry brings to the pedagogical spaces of the secondary English classroom. Performative inquiry encourages a rewriting of curricular texts that perform us—texts that have as yet to be imagined. Performative inquiry encourages a critical reading and re/interpretation of how we come to understand our worlds of relationship and engagement.

*But the important thing is first to understand the gamble of listening.*

—Jacques Daignault, 2005

As an educator, I have learned the importance of letting go of the script, of trusting in the moment, of listening to the multiple texts that emerge when we engage in cross-border curricular explorations through performative inquiry. And, in sharing and reflecting on, with my students, our experiences and choices of action following each inquiry, I have come to new perspectives on how people choose to



respond in ways that continually enlarge, clarify, or reaffirm our understanding of human interactions and relationships, and the world(s) we inhabit. *Not walls of cement, but the melodies of your temperatures.*

Exploring who we are as humans in relationship with each other and our environment is, I would suggest, the primary curricular work of teachers and students. To ask the questions: What are the issues, restraints, and intimacies—social, political, personal, communal, economic, scientific, cultural, spiritual—of our engagement and relationships together? And how might we communicate our concerns, resolve our differences, engage with each other and our environment in new ways?

Jacques Daignault (2005) speaks of an acousmatic text, a text that listens. An acousmatic text is a text that encourages the reader to respond through listening and rewriting, and through this shared reciprocity of listening and response, new texts emerge. Such texts may be written in words, or, as in role drama, embodied in action. We are written and rewritten by the embodied texts that write us even as we write and rewrite our embodied texts, listening to and for the stops that call us to attention. Each stop—a possible moment of learning and curricular turning point—requires us to ask: How shall I be received in this moment? How shall I receive you?

Performative inquiry through role drama invites teachers and students to create and explore new curricular worlds of engagement—embodied acousmatic texts that place our students and ourselves within the context, action, and environment of individual and communal inquiry and questioning. To see what happens—to imagine ourselves anew. As educators, in our curricular ambitions, if we truly love our children, our students, we must be willing to invite and receive their participation, to welcome the as-yet-not-known that our hospitality invites. As Hannah Arendt (1961) reminds us,

And education, too, is where we decide whether we love our children enough not to expel them from our world and leave them to their own devices, nor to strike from their hands their chance of undertaking something new, something unforeseen by us, but to prepare them in advance for the task of renewing a common world.

(p. 196)

I remember standing outside my twelfth grade classroom, wearing my kimono, carrying my vase and three flowers, my heart beating with anticipation, with fear. How would my stepping out of role as a student teacher be received? I remember the stillness when I first

entered the classroom and turned to face my students—now all in role, although they do not yet know this, as apprentice flower arrangers. I cross the threshold, taking my first step toward imagining performative inquiry as a research methodology, as a curricular engagement of inquiry that travels across disciplinary borders, a “laying down a path in walking” (Varela, 1987, p. 63), thus entering a landscape as yet unmarked beneath my feet in the presence of others.

A kaleidoscope of expressions greets my entrance into that long ago twelfth grade classroom. *How to respond? How to engage?* It was, I realize now, my first venturing into role, an invitation to my students to step beyond the walls of the classroom, into another world, to share a new way of being in relationship with each other, beyond the embodied text that is a conventional secondary English classroom, into new curricular texts of engagement, inquiry, and expression.

I am greeted with silence that slowly unfolds into presence and engagement. An offering of grace gifted to me by my students, one that has blossomed into a lifelong exploration of what happens when we interrupt the expected, evoke the possible, and invite our students to engage, not as students, but as fellow explorers in an as-yet not known curricular landscape of inquiry. We come, each of us, with our own questions, biases, motivations, experiences, cultural and social perspectives; but we come also to engage critically, reflectively,

responsively, playfully, creatively. We write together an emergent new curricular text of engagement, a performative text that lends itself to choices of action, interpretation, reflection, revision—a gift of presence and curiosity permitted by an embodied communal inquiry that engages us intimately.

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