Arts-Based Literacy Learning Like “New School”: (Re)Framing the Arts in and of Students’ Lives as Story

Jessica Whitelaw

While arts-based has received increased attention in recent years as a research methodology rooted in an aesthetic framework, less attention has been paid to conceptualizing what arts-based means in the context of particular disciplines of K–12 teaching and learning. This qualitative study recognizes a need to examine sustained and ongoing approaches to the teaching of English through art in an effort to better understand and articulate what art can do for literacy learning. I explore art as story as one way of conceptualizing a central role for art in English class where art serves as a tool for engagement and as the material for ongoing inquiry.

Renewed attention over the last decade to roles for the arts in learning, particularly in relation to an evolving multimodal communicative landscape, calls for a rethinking of both where the arts are located in the school curriculum and how they are engaged. However, while initiatives such as STEM to STEAM\(^1\) and the 21st Century Skills Arts Map\(^2\) advocate for the arts in a wide range of learning contexts, this attention circulates amid pervasive assumptions that have long cast art as nonessential and nonacademic (Davis, 2007). A climate of high-stakes testing and corporate models of schooling has heightened associations between measurable skills and “rigor” and between art and “soft” learning, further marginalizing art in favor of skills that can readily be tested. How, then, do research, policy, and practice square the demand for a more central role for art alongside a longstanding belief that art is nonessential? These tensions signal a critical moment and opportunity for research across a broad base of disciplines to examine and illuminate roles for art that are unique to those disciplines, to challenge assumptions that undergird a perceived art/academic binary, and to interrogate pedagogies that have historically kept art in the margins. The moment and opportunity...
call for imagining and theorizing new forms of praxis with attention to both how and why art should take a more central role.

This article is one attempt to consider a generative possibility at the intersections between literacy (which many deem to be essential) and art (which many deem to be nonessential). Alongside policy attention and theoretical arguments for why schools need the arts (Davis, 2007; Eisner, 2002), research at the intersections of art and literacy should be called on to (re)conceptualize and (re)frame praxis—to make visible how particular kinds of learning are made possible through the arts in literacy classrooms. As children’s literature author and arts advocate Michael Rosen (2014) argues, “How we teach the arts is as important as the fact we’re doing it.”

Thus, in this article I examine arts-based literacy pedagogy with teachers and students in an arts-based high school as one avenue to explore the possibility of placing the arts centrally in learning writ large and in English classrooms specifically. First, I locate a line of inquiry for arts-based teaching and learning in relation to arts integration and multiliteracies. Then, I make an argument for art as story, one way of conceiving of arts-based literacy teaching and learning that is unique to the goals of the English classroom. By drawing on notions of story as lived ways of shaping, exploring, and reconstituting human experience that are embodied across all forms of representation (hooks, 1995; Irwin, de Cosson, & Pinar, 2004; Richardson, 1997; Springgay & Irwin, 2005), I make an argument for what learning through art as story makes possible in the English classroom and consider why these possibilities are critically important today.

**Arts-Based Literacies: Locating a Line of Inquiry**

Because this study construes the arts broadly (i.e., not one particular art form), I draw from recent theoretical shifts that consider the arts within an epistemology that relies on the aesthetic, the imagination, and the embodiment of meaning (Abbs, 2003). I use the term the arts or art to refer to the design and representation of meaning through the six traditional arts—visual arts, drama, dance, music, film, and literature—as well as a range of hybrid forms that combine digital modes and other forms of representation.

The argument in this article can be considered alongside a body of research that assumes the inherent value of the arts (Davis, 2007; Eisner, 2002), contending that there are identifiable habits of mind that the arts teach (Eisner, 2002) and thinking dispositions that they cultivate (Tishman, Jay, & Perkins, 1995). Building on Eisner’s case for art’s inherent value in cultivating habits of mind, Hetland, Winner, Veenema, and Sheridan (2007)...
argue that particular kinds of “studio thinking” or “cognitive and attitudinal dispositions” (p. 4) are developed in the context of studio classes (wherein instruction is characterized as demonstration-lecture, students-at-work, and critique); they believe these dispositions have a reach beyond the studio into other areas of the curriculum and students’ lives. Questions extending from this work include what the arts teach under different pedagogical conditions as well as the kinds of thinking that the arts cultivate in other learning contexts that are specific to those disciplines and contexts—two inquiries that I pursue here.

Related efforts have long been taken up under the umbrella of arts integration across a range of disciplines. Put forward as an ideal in American schooling as early as 1918, arts integration has been the dominant framework for arts teaching and learning outside of arts disciplines. In a comprehensive review of research, Burnaford, Brown, Doherty, and McLaughlin (2007) underscored the myriad ways arts integration has been taken up and argued that, despite its potential and staying power as a framework for learning through and with art in school, arts integration as a body of work was more or less without a recognizable agenda, with different goals, frameworks, and assumptions about the role of art in learning. On the one hand, this lack of agenda has been celebrated as an organic proliferation of research in different contexts and a function of the diversity it inhabits (Deasy, 2002); on the other, it has made arts integration difficult to characterize and advocate for in a coherent fashion (Burnaford et al., 2007). In recent years, a movement within arts integration with organizations such as Chicago Arts Partnerships in Education (CAPE), Pennsylvania Arts in Education Partnership (PAEP), the ArtsLiteracy Project at Brown University (ArtsLit), and others have pursued reciprocal and co-generative relationships that seek to preserve the inherent value of art alongside other disciplinary studies. Within this movement, arts integration is framed as a collaborative partnership between a teaching artist and a classroom teacher. In this configuration, art and the subject being taught are generally conceived of as separate disciplines with each partner working to meet curricular goals so that arts learning and the other academic learning are both deepened (Aprill, 2010).

A related and intersecting body of work focuses not on the arts per se but on multiliteracies (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000; Knobel & Lankshear, 2007; New London Group, 1996). This research explores new landscapes for literacy learning in the digital age and the notion that these literacies are multiple and engaged across a range of modes (communication channels) and spaces (both in and out of school). While this work has made important contributions to theorizing new and emerging literacies as fluid, socially situated
sign systems, multiliteracies emerged as a field of study informed by social semiotics (the study of meaning-making as a social practice across sign systems), largely outside of conversations in the arts (Caughlan, 2008). More recently, a body of research on youth and digital literacies foregrounds new and emerging contexts for rethinking art and literacy connections through the construction and performance of multimodal stories in and out of school and in global communities (Alrutz, 2015; Halverson, 2013; Hull & Katz, 2006; Jocson, 2015; Rhoades, 2012; Vasudevan, 2016). Making explicit links across the arts, literacy, and multimodalities is a way of bridging these related conversations and rethinking what it means to be literate in the twenty-first century (Albers & Sanders, 2010).

Although *arts-based* and *arts integration* are terms often used interchangeably, at its most basic level, arts-based as an approach to pedagogy makes less of a distinction between separate disciplines of study (in this case, the arts and literacy) and does not rely on a teaching artist in the classroom. Unlike multiliteracies, arts-based pedagogy is more centrally concerned with both the forms of representation and processes of art, assuming something is lost when the term *art* is omitted altogether (Caughlan, 2008; Gadsden, 2008). With these subtle but important differences, I consider arts-based pedagogy as sharing the theoretical foundations of arts-based research and its tradition of placing art in post-positivist terms that assume that multiple ways of knowing are central to knowledge generation (Barone & Eisner, 2012). Moreover, a growing body of arts-based research in recent years has yielded rich insight into the ways that art can be a mode of representation and a mode of inquiry (Cahnmann-Taylor & Siegesmund, 2008; Conrad, 2002; Irwin, DeCosson, & Pinar, 2004; Springgay & Irwin, 2005). This broadening opens up the possibility for art to move beyond the realm of product or tool (although it can be both of these things) into epistemological and methodological realms central to sense-making in research, schooling, and everyday life.

**Art as Story**

In this article, I make an argument for *art as story* as a way of thinking about how a sustained arts-based pedagogy can be taken up in the English classroom. For teachers looking to make art accessible to their students, I explore how engagement with (both making and using) a range of forms of art as stories can democratize art as open to all by making it central to everyday sense-making in the classroom. Art is not inherently democratic or participatory; it can be quite isolating when it is placed on a pedestal and considered
An expanded notion of story in many forms can blur the distinction between high and low art, inviting teachers to consider how classrooms can be transformed into spaces that include the many arts and stories already present in students’ everyday lives as generative platforms for inquiry.

While stories in the form of fiction are central to the English classroom, we limit their potential when we conceive of them as static texts for examination. Research from a range of disciplines explores how stories are embodied (lived and multisensory) ways of making sense of human experience. In particular, research on narrative has established complex relationships between story and identity construction. In the sections that follow, I consider the construction of life texts as stories (Bell, 2010; Enciso, 2011, Kamler, 2001) rather than primarily as voices of individual expression. This consideration emphasizes how story is both interpretive and social in nature; as Hesford (1999) argues, people lead storied lives and tell stories of those lives in selective, constructed ways, within historical, social, cultural, intellectual, and institutional contexts. Haraway (1988) similarly says that truth is always “storied” and facts are always “artifacts”—not relative and untrue but rather bound up in the processes of human production. Story can thus be a way of centering human experience and identity as resources for knowledge-building through critical reflection and reinscription. I draw on notions of story as lived ways of shaping, exploring, and reconstructing human experience that are embodied across all forms of representation. I consider how the concept of art as story can encourage permeable boundaries among the arts, students’ lives, and the world, creating powerful new relational spaces for inquiry in the classroom.

Art, since the late 1990s, has seen a movement toward what Bourriaud (1998) famously called a “relational aesthetic,” where art is designed to bring people together for particular kinds of embodied experience that seek to create some kind of disruption and transformative thinking on the part of participants. The work I explore in this article emphasizes the relational affordances of story in a range of forms for understanding oneself and others (i.e., who am I in relation to your story?). It explores what happens when students begin to view their lives and the lives of others as “storied” and as works of art. It explores what happens when they begin to see all lives as mutable and how they can begin to resist the dominant single story,
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cultivate an anti-deterministic stance, and reconstruct relational, agentive identities. A relational aesthetic provides a generative lens for conceptualizing how two teachers and their students enact a participatory democratic space for engagement with art across many forms in the social context of the English classroom.

Methods: Collective Inquiry with Teachers and Students

In the following section, I provide a description of my investigation into art as story with adolescents and their teachers, including details about data collection and analysis as well as a description of the context for the work. The methodological design sought to make sense of how teachers design for arts-based learning, how students and teachers experience and enact that design, and the kinds of literacies this work can cultivate.

Data Collection and Analysis

Findings in this article are a subset of a qualitative study at an arts-based high school where my overarching question was, How are teachers and students experiencing and understanding their engagement with arts-based literacies? In an ethnographic study aimed at understanding situated literacy practices (Heath & Street, 2008), I worked with two English teachers: ninth-grade teacher Lorraine Ustaris and 10th-grade teacher Molly Thacker at Tobin Arts Academy, a public, arts-based high school in a large northeastern city. For one school calendar year, I followed one section of ninth-grade English (Lorraine’s class) and one section of 10th-grade English (Molly’s class) with a combined total of 47 students. Over the course of the year, these two teachers, their students, and I sought to individually and collectively understand what arts-based leaning meant in a context where the project of learning through art was central and sustained over time. The research question itself took shape during my work with the teachers and was not set a priori. Informed by the traditions of participatory inquiry and practitioner research, the research emerged as a collective inquiry with and alongside teachers and students to address a shared concern from multiple perspectives within an inquiry community (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009). All of us—the students, teachers, and I—had a stake in better understanding what this work was about, stakes that extended beyond us, as the principal insisted: “Teachers need this research, the school district needs this research, parents need this research.”

This article represents my understanding of an operative theory of practice that undergirded arts-based learning within Molly’s and Lorraine’s English classrooms. Although it was not a rubric or classification articulated
by teachers or students, I came to see art as story as a tacit way that students and teachers seemed to experience pedagogy at Tobin as “different.” It was not uncommon, for instance, for the principal to suggest this difference in her conversational reminders, especially to teachers new to the school: “Remember, this is not about doing projects!” Art as story became a way of understanding a sustained arts-based approach to learning that was an alternative to thinking of art as isolated activities, units, or projects; it represents how I came to conceive of art as being centered in the multiple stories in Molly’s and Lorraine’s classrooms.

I drew from a range of ethnographic tools and processes for data collection and analysis as “bricoleur” to best capture the “complex, dense, reflexive collage-like creation that represents researcher’s images, understandings and interpretations of the world or phenomenon under analysis” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2007, p. 5). These tools included classroom observations and fieldnotes (107 hours) and interviews with teachers, students, and the principal (40 hours) as means of understanding the literacy practices students and teachers took up. I designed, reviewed, and adapted interview criteria for students with teacher consultation and ongoing observation to include a range of student histories (incoming school experience such as public neighborhood, charter, parochial, home-school, cyber-school); identities (race, gender and cultural identities, arts majors); and observed dispositions in class toward school, learning, and the arts. Interviews, both formal and informal, occurred regularly with teachers, and one formal interview was conducted with the school principal. Additionally, I collected artifacts including formal and informal writing, teacher lesson plans and syllabi, multimodal projects, and artwork.

My role in the classroom on a daily basis was intentionally both that of documentarian and participant. Although I was not the designated teacher in either classroom, I carried out the study alongside teachers and students with a strong teacher-researcher identity. Drawing from my work over the past two decades in K–12 literacy teaching and leadership and literacy education in graduate school and teacher education, I approached the research with many lived questions and observations about art’s place in schooling as a student, an educator, and a parent as well as a researcher.

My participation centered on ongoing dialogue with teachers and students around the work of everyday practice as a way of mining the dialectic of the teacher-researcher identity and affording multiple perspectives on learning. Investigation in the form of oral inquiry was ongoing throughout the data collection and in my interactions with students and teachers. I sought “inspired ways of looking,” where teacher talk and oral inquiry are
considered to be a central educational and epistemic activity (Himley, 1991, p. 57). Observation and oral inquiry shaped the data collection over time as new questions and patterns arose.

After my year in the field, I analyzed the full corpus of data using open coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) to identify 10 broad themes. This process involved an iterative analysis with attention to teacher/researcher/student voices and perspectives. This phase was followed by additional layers of conceptual coding and ongoing and recursive inductive analysis (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003) to further reduce the findings to three overarching themes and to identify thematic relations among them. These three themes represent my findings of how art was taken up at Tobin: art as story, art as a theoretical instrument, and art as action. Art as story—the focus of this article—was one of the ways I came to understand how teachers and students designed, enacted, and experienced arts-based literacy learning at Tobin.

Context of the Investigation

Tobin was a unique site and opportunity to study a comprehensive arts-based approach to adolescent literacy because this high school conveyed a belief in the inherent value of art and positioned it centrally in learning across all subjects of the curriculum. Calling themselves “a student-centered community that encourages intellectual growth and curiosity while promoting academic excellence in and through the arts,” Tobin was not a traditional arts school where the primary focus might be developing a student’s expertise in an arts major such as dance, theater, music, or visual art. At Tobin, students did select an arts major, but their time in that major was limited to one period each day. Fundamental to the school’s mission, however, was the expectation that art would be a means of learning across all content areas and central to academic work. Teachers and the administration described the school as both arts-based and college preparatory.

The year of this study marked Lorraine’s second year of high school teaching. Prior to coming to Tobin she taught first-year courses in composition, reading, critical thinking, and math for one year at an urban two-year college. Lorraine, who identified as first-generation Filipino, brought an interest in a range of media and art forms as well as community organizing and had shared her work on twenty-first-century education and media arts regularly at professional conferences. Molly, who identified as White, was in her sixth year of teaching and her second year at Tobin. She began her career with Teach for America and taught at an urban, neighborhood high school for four years before coming to Tobin. An activist and member of local
teacher communities and inquiry networks in the city, Molly blogged for a local urban teaching magazine and presented at local conferences. Because there was just one English teacher per grade, Molly taught all of Lorraine’s former students in their 10th-grade year.

Working within the constraints and possibilities of an accountability-driven urban district and school, Lorraine and Molly built their curricula around mandated standards, integrating these standards into units they designed around essential questions. Through an initial recommendation from the school’s founding principal, and subsequently meeting with both teachers, I discovered that both framed their work as inquiry and critical literacy and were interested in collectively taking up research questions about arts-based teaching and learning. Lorraine, Molly, and I shared a view of pedagogy that privileges local knowledge and inquiry for transformative teaching, learning, and schooling (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009).

Tobin was classified as one of 18 magnet special admissions high schools in the city. At the time of the study, Tobin included grades 9–11 and had 350 students (the school was in its third year, having started with just ninth grade and increasing by one grade level each year). Drawing from an array of urban neighborhoods and demographics, Tobin had a diverse student body and a population designated by the school district to be 52 percent economically disadvantaged. The school drew students from more than 35 middle schools, mostly public, some with charter designations, and some parochial. Although some students lived in the immediate working-class neighborhood and walked to school, for the most part, students travelled to and from school through public transportation, sometimes transferring up to three times, both morning and afternoon each day. Students at Tobin chose to be there, and admissions decisions were made according to a process that included an application and a semiformal audition. Across teachers and students, there was a shared understanding that the audition process placed a high value on interest in and commitment to art over technical expertise in a given arts discipline. When asked why they selected Tobin, students largely responded that it was because of the arts focus and because they had heard it was a “good school” and offered a “good education.” The makeup of the school population in terms of ethnicity was 52 percent White, 28 percent African American, 13 percent Latino/Hispanic, 5 percent Asian American, and 3 percent other. A total of 26 percent of students in the school had been identified as eligible for support services: 11 percent special education and 14 percent gifted and talented.
Findings: Like “New School”

In the following sections I share my findings around what was made possible through the design and enactment of literacy pedagogy where a wide range of arts were taken up and investigated as story. Through examples and analysis, I share how this approach to arts-based pedagogy created a context for particular kinds of inquiry to happen. In the first section, I explore how art as story involved starting with the arts already present in students’ lives to create a rich and relevant context for inquiry into the world around them. Then, in the middle two sections, I investigate how stories across many forms of art created a relational context for students to understand themselves in relation to others. Last, I explore how art as story provided a platform to expand epistemologies by considering relationships between form and meaning within larger contexts of social inquiry.

Inquiry in the World: Starting with the Arts in Students’ Lives

When ninth-grade students, new from middle schools across the city, found their way to English class on the first day of school, Pink Floyd’s song and video “Another Brick in the Wall” were playing in Lorraine’s classroom. This was the students’ first shared text, an introduction to ninth grade that, from the start, positioned the song and video as a story to examine. The video depicts an assembly line, mechanized, dehumanized image of school; the scene of a classroom is juxtaposed with students in a factory, all wearing faceless masks, marching to a directive teacher amid industrial machine imagery. The scene, later shown to be a student’s daydream, depicts a subsequent revolt as students literally “tear down the walls” of the factory/school. Taken together, the music and video told a story of school, and through the interpretation of the song’s figurative language, students were invited to think about the notion of school-as-factory and to consider what makes up the figurative wall.

Students were asked to write in their journals about their best and worst images of school and what they would learn and not learn in each. Extending the metaphor of the schoolhouse further, Lorraine posed the question: “Is society a kind of school?” This entry into ninth-grade English class set the stage for shared inquiry, positioned the class and school as potentially different, and led to talk in the coming weeks of what Lorraine suggested could be “new school” (a play on the phrase “old school”). In a September reflection, ninth grader Melinda wrote:
What I learned in English so far is that English can be taught “new school,” also that everyone can be themselves and be accepted. Another thing I learned is that the Tobin Arts Academy is not like other schools.

From the beginning, students had some indication that their experience at Tobin would not be an assembly-line production of school. Instead, this grounding orientation constructed around a piece of music and video required students to imagine and articulate their desires for what school might be like if they could reinvent it. As incoming ninth graders, by voicing what they had come to know and experience about school in dialogue around art and with each other, they engaged in the kind of reflecting, forward thinking, and sense-making that is the first step in imagining what might be “otherwise” (Greene, 1995).

Starting with art of everyday experience—a song from popular culture—can be seen as a move to democratize the consumption of art (Bourdieu & Darbel, 1991), distribute the privilege of access, and make it a platform for engagement and action with the world. At Tobin, it was the placement of a wide range of art in everyday learning and thinking that prompted students to re/consider what it means to learn through art in school. Just as Dewey (1934) argued that the things that have “vitality for the average person are things he [or she] does not take to be arts” (p. 4), both teachers embraced an expansive definition of art that included story in a wide range of forms, so that music, videos, autobiographies, poems, vignettes, paintings, and digital stories, among other forms, were all considered art. Art was a way of bringing the vitality of everyday life into the classroom as stories. As ninth grader Raquel argued, “Teenagers these days—mostly—they like something art-related, like drawing, or theater, or dance or music. And you can all relate.” Art was brought in from the spectrum of youth culture to the museum, and teachers positioned it as a diverse assemblage of texts that offered a range of perspectives that written texts alone could not.

Expanding what counts as art in the literacy classroom offered multiple and embodied ways of experiencing story. It repositioned art in the curriculum, brought participation with art to all students rather than a select few, challenged notions of art on its pedestal, and, in Dewey’s words, worked “to recover the continuity of aesthetic experience with normal processes of living” (p. 16). Speaking to this design, ninth-grade student Alyssa, a self-identified writer who “never really liked school that much,” described Tobin as a place that “doesn’t feel like school” and “makes me personally want to wake up and come here every day.” To ninth-grade student Justin, it became a Freirian (1987) practice of “reading the world”: “it kinda . . .
all revolves around life . . . and it’s like, easier to understand life if you understand art pieces.”

Setting up a relationship between life and art pieces was integral to recentering art in the curriculum at Tobin. Lorraine described this intent as opening up what counts as communication and foregrounding the dialogic nature of art: “People see art as art,” she said, “but they don’t see it as communication.” Starting with the arts in students’ lives as stories was a way for Lorraine to help students enter into a dialogue around ideas and encourage an opening up of where knowledge comes from. For example, ninth-grade student Seneca, looking back on this first day of school, reframes her view of art in relation to learning:

In the beginning of the year, I remember the first day. We were listening to Pink Floyd’s *Another Brick in the Wall* and I was thinking, “why are we listening to this? . . . . This isn’t going to help me at all.” And then, I was listening to everyone else talking and it was like, it made more sense . . . And it helped to open my mind to like, maybe I can read more than just a textbook, maybe it’s okay to use different things to help me with my schoolwork.

Seneca is initially unsure about the utility of art in school and asks herself “why (are we listening to this)?” She is led to wonder what “helps” students learn, first thinking, “This isn’t going to help me at all” and then, realizing that, in the context of social inquiry, this song and “different things” (arts) could actually “help” her learn. Sense-making in Seneca’s new understanding relies on a “connectedness” among ideas, art, and the world. While on the one hand, Lorraine was teaching students metaphor (is society a school?), interacting with art as story provided a more expansive and transformative learning agenda by encouraging students to (re)consider where knowledge can be found and by highlighting the relationships among art, knowledge, and everyday life.

**Inquiry into Each Other: The Relational Context of Art and Story**

Designing and enacting arts-based pedagogy around the tacit concept of art as story created a context where learning from and with one another was central. In Seneca’s comments above, she draws attention to “talking” and “listening to everyone else,” not unlike Melinda’s earlier notion of “new school” with “everyone being accepted.” Arts-based teaching that intentionally mined art’s social potential enabled a unique relational aesthetic in the English classroom. It created a context for participation and shared activity. The emphasis on public participation was ongoing and intentional; in ninth
grader Justin’s words, arts-based learning involved “participating . . . having our own opinions and making sure that we can express them.”

After their discussion about the Pink Floyd video and images of school, Lorraine asked students to create a visual body autobiography from a paper cutout meant to symbolize an abstract image of sameness. Adapted from the body biography (Underwood, 1987), the paper cut-outs required students to represent not another character, but themselves. They were asked to transform the cutout image into a symbolic representation of themselves where each feature, or symbol, represented something about them (for instance, the eyes were to represent their perspectives/how they see the world, the ground to represent the ground they stand on, and their hands to represent what they hold onto). In their first presentations to the class, during the second week of school, they were, in three to five minutes, asked by Lorraine to convey a sense of themselves as individuals, “emotionally, socially, intellectually, and artistically,” with the expectation that all students would share and that “everyone’s story [would] be acknowledged.”

Rendering themselves visually and symbolically, although not difficult in technical execution, positioned students’ lives as works of art. The body autobiographies are one example of how engagement with art happened in a way that underscored the relational aspect of stories. They were inquiries into students’ identities, and the requirement that each person would share created pathways for accessing one another’s experiences. The form carried particular affordances for doing this because the metaphor-making translated individual experience into abstractions that were more relatable to others. As Greene (1995) points out, metaphor requires the translation of lived, particular experience into imagery, which has the potential to arouse the imagination and increase students’ capacities to connect with others. When students found symbolic ways of representing collective concerns such as family, friendship, art, and identity, their worlds became more porous with one another. For example, when Mark described how he rendered his body-image with half of himself portrayed in oversized clothes because “sometimes [I] wear clothes that don’t fit me” and described drawing mist for his background “because I never had a clear image in my life,” these metaphorical representations of experience became relatable to others. The symbolic representation provided a platform for students to develop relational identities—to find common ground in relating to one another across these humanizing metaphors while still defining themselves as unique individuals in a social group.

When students presented their autobiographies in class, Lorraine dimmed the lights and created a makeshift spotlight with the projector light.
Each piece was presented in succession without pause or comment, filling the room with countless metaphors for human experience, some resonating, others contradicting and refracting. The act of every student standing in front of their peers and teacher in the early days of ninth grade and revealing themselves to one another was full of emotional risk, and this energy was palpable in the room. Mark, a ninth-grade vocal major, later reflected on this activity and on the relational aesthetic of the class more broadly:

At my old school we had literature, but it was mainly like vocab words and you know it was mainly that, and reading. I don’t know. But Ms. Ustaris’s class, it makes me think because some of things we touch on are so like, sentimental—I don’t know—it’s weird. In a good way. That’s one of the reasons why I love it because you hear everybody’s perspectives and it’s like, we grow and have such a bond now, that we could say the littlest of things and, you know, take it into consideration.

Part of this bond seemed to come from opportunities to access knowledge about one another through art and stories. For instance, the visual form of the autobiography also made room for multiple subjectivities and nuanced and conflicting accounts through imagery and juxtaposition; students didn’t need to arrive at singular representations. Whitney, for example, a drama student who grappled with stage fright, drew half of herself as a mime to convey her shyness, and the other half as a performer. Aniya depicted dark and light in her eyes because she said she saw “hate in them, not peace like she wanted.” Isabelle, a student who had left her parents in Kenya to come to the United States with her older brother to live with their grandparents and attend the school, included a hybrid Korean/Kenyan flag (her father was Korean and her mother Kenyan) and told us, “I just like, you know, people to know stuff about my life.” For adolescents struggling to define themselves in a society that tends to operate on fixed notions of the self, the pieces served as a way for students to begin to view human experience in more complex ways, as they saw a reflection of themselves as in-the-making (Ellsworth, 2005) and having multiple identities. These arts-based practices encouraged students to see images of themselves as complex, contradictory, and at the same time whole, serving as a necessary step in viewing others in similar ways that resist oversimplification and essentialization. The visual form accommodated this complexity through imagery and juxtaposition in their stories and served as the material for this relational identity work.

Importantly, the body autobiographies were well-suited to the context and purpose of the activity because all students, whether they were accomplished in visual art or not, could participate in the symbolic representation.
This accessibility to all meant that the meaning of the piece did not rely on artistic ability but rather on the extent to which students leveraged the form to make meaning. The emphasis on art as material for inquiry and dialogue, both in the making and observing of art, was central to accessing one another’s experiences and ideas. While the work was designed around ELA standards such as metaphor and characterization (the teaching standards that were posted for this assignment), sharing their autobiographical art emphasized the relational dimension of students’ lives as stories. In a written reflection on the identity unit in mid-September, Alyssa recognized the simultaneously intellectual and social nature of the work, claiming that she “learned a surprising amount about literal and figurative meaning” and also “how to be more open to each other in the classroom environment.”

Students described the relational context of this work in different ways throughout the year, as “trying to learn each other’s language” (Justin); “listening to each other [versus only listening to the teacher]” (Raquel); “hearing it from someone first-hand” (Seneca); “relating to each other’s stories” (Aniya); and “learning from people your age and getting a new perspective” (Alyssa); and “finding yourself within finding other people” (Melinda). These descriptions resonate with Nakkula and Toshalis’s (2006) notion of the self as always implicated relationally; how we see ourselves is always tied to how we see others and how we are seen by others. Acts of communication through art and story illuminated a personal and shared world, encouraging students to see identity as never wholly autonomous and always constructed in relation to others.

Inquiry into Themselves: The Arts of Students’ Lives

Both teachers included not only stories in adolescents’ lives but also autobiographical work that emphasized the arts of their lives. Hesford (1999) argues that “the autobiographical act is not a mere act of retrieval of an already existing and complete self but rather a performative act through which the self is created and re-created in the process of the telling.” In this act, she foregrounds both the necessity of “selective attention” and the requirement to be “a reader of oneself” (p. 3). As students engaged with storytelling in a relational and arts-based context, they encountered ongoing opportunities to be readers of themselves. Students expressed their awareness of this process and the idea that “writing helps you know things about yourself” (Isabelle),

Acts of communication through art and story illuminated a personal and shared world, encouraging students to see identity as never wholly autonomous and always constructed in relation to others.
a comment suggestive of the ways that stories can form and re-form identity and make sense of experience. Multiple forms of autobiographical text, written and otherwise, were considered among a diverse assemblage of arts across both classrooms.

Mid-fall, ninth-grade students read Cisneros’s (1984) *The House on Mango Street*, where a vignette called “My Name” served as an anchor text for students to write vignettes on their names. In Cisneros’s book, the central character Esperanza explores the power of words and their relationship to how we perceive our identities (past, present, and future) through a reflection on her name. The relationships among writing, identity, and freedom that many of Lorraine’s students would negotiate through this assignment had been introduced in the Cisneros text: “I put it down on paper and then the ghost does not ache so much. I write it down and Mango [the narrator’s neighborhood street personified] says good-bye sometimes. She does not hold me with both arms. She sets me free” (p. 110).

Prior to writing her vignette, ninth-grade student Alyssa responded to a journal question/prompt—“What’s in a name?”—with a somewhat generic response:

A name is a title every human receives at birth. It is a series of letters forming a personal label others will know you as forever. Names are important because of what they are used for and I believe they are, in fact, a necessity. A person’s name sticks with them forever and gives them a unique trait. I believe it is the first way in anyone’s life they may become an individual.

Several days later, Alyssa wrote a “My Name Is . . .” in the art form of a vignette, in two drafts. This is the first:

My name is ugly, it is a size 9 shoe on a size 4 foot. My name is a book in the library, so common and traditional. My name is not me. My name is a club millions could join into. It is unspecial. It is a tag sewn into my life I am forced to wear always. Nothing I’d pick for myself. My name is Alyssa. The white crayon in a sixty-four pack of crayons. The last color I’d ever decide to use. Nonetheless, it is the term my father gave to me at birth, to define by the end of my life. Although I feel it is not mine to define, instead my cousin’s: Alyssa° Baldacci. She was in the dictionary before I, and so my tag disowns me.

This vignette provides a space for Alyssa’a generic response to become storiied. In this case, it is an impassioned argument for why Alyssa believes her name does not represent her, why it as an imposition and something that she feels defined by. With figurative language (required for this assignment) she conveys herself as “tagged.”
Choosing to revise this piece because she said it had “an effect,” “was meaningful to me,” and had “tone,” Alyssa submitted a new version with an additional section that projected herself into the future. She added:

But one day, my name will change. It will be a new tag on my clothing of life, and it will fit me perfectly. . . . It will be beautiful. When I change my name, it will be something that will truly symbolize me. It will be different. It will be the needle in the haystack, it will stand out. A splatter on a white canvas, it will be new art.

Alyssa’s addition to the piece projects a course of action where the second half of the piece stands in sharp opposition to the first. The revision is entirely future-oriented as she shifts from describing “what my name is” to “what my name will be” (effectively changing the assignment prompt). The three iterations of writing trace a trajectory for Alyssa’s life as a work of art, from what is (generally) to what is (for me) to what it will be (for me). As she constructs her dilemma on the page, she creates a path for reinvention.

Alyssa wrote in her written reflection on this piece:

“I decided I’d like to do this” refers to both the revision of the piece and to her subsequent decision to change her name, which she did—from that point forward going by Lys. In her own way, Lys constructs her life as a work of art in her vignette. Lys’s example shows a student as “textworker, someone who can work actively and consciously to shape the body of a text” (Kamler, 2001, p. 178), but also as a producer of a new representation of reality as she remakes herself through writing (p. 54).

Building on this work with storytelling, naming, and selfhood, Aniya’s vignette conveyed her awareness of how identity is both individually and relationally constructed and in flux. Her vignette embodied a tension between how she perceived her name and how others might perceive it differently. She began the piece by casting her name as powerful and agentive:

My name is Aniya. To me it means independence, successful, hardworking, and outstanding trooper. When I tell people my name they often recite my name pronouncing it “Aniya” but originally it is pronounced “O-niya” with a capital “O.” Ani was the name I was supposed to be given at birth but my mother decided to name me Aniya instead. The name I have been given sounds to me like a source of motivation, dedication, concentration and, last but not least, determination. . . . These four terms justify me as Aniya Eliza Williams, NOT just another name an African American woman gave to me.
In this first section of the piece, Aniya sets up the juxtaposition of her perceptions of herself—as independent, hardworking, and outstanding trooper—against those of others who often mispronounce her name. The perception of others is included almost as a side-note next to her passionate articulation of the qualities that her name represents to her. Later, Aniya alters tack to consider and question how the perception of others could affect her future:

As I think about what my name means to me I also wonder how it will affect me as I become older and stand on my feet without my parents. Questions cloud my head. What if my name was not Aniya . . . would my name stand out? Would people look at me differently? Will my name determine whether I get a successful job or not?

These future-oriented concerns are framed as questions here and represent a larger unknown and “cloud” for Aniya. She expresses tensions between “standing out” and “getting a successful job” and returns to a sense of confidence in her perceptions to close the piece:

My personality is what makes my name stand out as an individual. So when I look in the mirror staring back at myself—in my heart and my soul—I will know that Aniya Eliza Williams is a leader and will never be a follower.

Aniya was a talented, passionate, grounded, and confident ninth grader, and this piece conveys these qualities alongside her searching. It is a clarity further heightened by a critical awareness of racial identity (the name “an African American woman gave to me”) and the multivoicedness of the piece; she roots her identity in her mother, her race, and her strong inner sense of self, projecting it forward into a vision of a successful future. While this confidence is juxtaposed with a concern and question about how others may see her and whether her life chances will have anything to do with her name, the piece is bookended by a powerful sense of strength and vision and the agency to “lead” into the direction of her desire.

Aniya told me in an interview shortly afterward that this piece meant a great deal to her. “I guess you could say I have an African American name,” she told me, and “sometimes that makes me wonder what kind of job I’m gonna get. But probably not,” she went on. “I don’t want it to affect that. I think it’s more about how the person is and what they have to offer and you know . . . that’s why I think that is my best writing.” One reading of this comment is that Aniya associated the casting of her convictions—her talking back to the possibility of injustice and racial discrimination—with her best writing. Finding strength in story and having the space to speak up was consistent across Aniya’s work and experience at Tobin. She told me that
“writing and talking about how we see the world and stuff like that makes me want to open up more and tell my story. And that will help me later in life. It makes me stronger. You know when somebody tells a story, it makes them stronger. Here, we can come to school, and speak up.”

The questions raised in Aniya’s vignette became part of a larger autobiographical inquiry around race that she took up in the class. In a later conversation about a podcast story on racial profiling, Aniya acknowledged that stories make us feel things, and can thus be unsettling:

When we were talking about The Fat Blue Line, a bunch of the students were talking about how they felt when the police pulled him over for something he didn’t do. I couldn’t relate but I like understood, as being African American, how they would feel. And uh, it made me feel some type of way, but I’m glad that we talk about such things in English class.

Feeling “a certain type of way” conveys a sense of ambivalence, but in this case it was welcome ambivalence; Aniya is “glad” to talk about “such things” (racial profiling). Lys’s “fury becoming apparent” or Aniya’s “heart and soul” or “feeling a certain type of way” all convey an association between learning and feeling at Tobin, the kinds of learning and feeling that are invited an encouraged through story.

Students’ constructions of their lives as works of art required that they step out and look inward in ways that are often inaccessible when immersed in day-to-day life. For Alyssa, her fury became apparent and she changed her name. For Aniya, she grappled with how she viewed herself and how others might view her, anchoring herself in a powerful gendered, racial identity. While schools and society tend to operate on fixed notions of the self, both Lys’s and Aniya’s pieces are illustrative of the ways that students explored their lives and created stories to understand their pasts, to place themselves in the present, and to imagine their futures. This looking back, anchoring in the present, and looking forward is a capacity that is developed through storytelling and helps students to see their lives as open to creation and revision. As Foucault (2000) describes: “I’m an experimenter in the sense that I write in order to change myself and in order not to think the same thing as before” (pp. 239–240). Lys’s and Aniya’s work serve as two examples of how the construction of their lives as works of art provided opportunities to experiment, to claim and create new versions of themselves.

Inquiry into Form and Meaning: Opening up Epistemic Possibility through Art as Story

Story in the form of literature and writing, particularly the novel, has long been the cornerstone of the secondary English classroom. With a changing
modal landscape and the subsequent need for students to be makers and readers of meaning across a range of forms, English teachers now have a larger stake in what art educators have long understood: the idea that form has a profound effect on thought. Choices about form necessarily affect which aspects of meaning can be constructed, represented, and understood (Eisner, 2002; Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2006), and these choices are embedded in the complexities of storytelling across multiple modes and forms of representation. Art as story expanded the range of texts available to students and foregrounded the relationship between form and meaning.

Molly described her intention for selecting a wide range of texts this way: “I definitely try to get a range of different kinds of texts, if for nothing else, for variety, but also like looking at the same question or the same issue from lots of different viewpoints and multiple genres allow us to do that.” Molly’s intentions are consistent with the historical meaning of the word text as a work of art—*woven*, etymologically meaning “a tissue, a woven fabric,” taken from the Latin, *texere*, “to weave” (*Oxford English Dictionary*, 1993, p. 120). A range of texts in Molly’s class could figuratively allow for a more textured understanding of a given topic in a way that even the most carefully selected reading alone could not. Looking at issues across different texts helped students to develop an awareness that if stories are a way of knowing and understanding human phenomena, multiple forms of story have the potential to expand what can be accessed, known, and understood.

Molly’s students began the school year by explicitly thinking about the role of multiple texts in English class, a concept that was introduced by viewing and discussing the TED talk by Nigerian novelist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (2009) titled “The Danger of a Single Story.” In it, Adichie argues that life and culture consist of countless overlapping stories and that, although single stories may not be untrue, they are incomplete. This idea offered a grounding theoretical approach to 10th-grade English class, and students referenced the piece frequently throughout the rest of the year as they came into contact with and collectively negotiated many stories, stereotypes, and counternarratives. Natasha told me during an interview that she believed that the class intended “to open our minds and pretty much eliminate single stories.” English class was premised on the idea that the more vast an array of stories we have available to us, the more we are equipped to resist the single story. Taking a stance to resist the single story created a platform for approaching myriad forms of text in English class with a critical perspective as the juxtaposition of many stories foregrounded each as perspectival and authored/created. This juxtaposition provided a generative platform for criticality through questions such as, *Whose story? What does it include or leave out?*
However, “texture” was not just about offering a range of perspectives through print forms of story. Expanding Adichie’s argument to include story across multiple forms of representation exponentially increases our capacity to resist the single story. In other words, if multiple stories can extend our interpretive possibility, multiple forms of story can extend our epistemic possibility, not just what we know but also the ways we know it. Thus, students paid attention to the forms of stories in relation to their meanings. Their work took up a critical perspective by asking, Whose story? What does it include or leave out? and How is the story told and how does the telling affect what it means?

During their first unit, 10th-grade students read and studied a range of what Molly called memoir texts. In addition to reading Ishmael Beah’s memoir *A Long Way Gone* (2007), they engaged in student-led discussions and watched excerpts from films such as Werner Herzog’s *Grizzly Man* and Edward Zwick’s *Blood Diamond*. They viewed clips from speeches and examined works of art. They read excerpts from memoirs that included *A Place to Stand: The Making of a Poet*, by Jimmy Santiago Baca (2002); *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*, by Sherman Alexie (2009); *Angela’s Ashes*, by Frank McCourt (1999); *Bad Boy: A Memoir*, by Walter Dean Myers (2002); and *Two or Three Things I Know for Sure*, by Dorothy Allison (1996). They wrote literacy autobiographies, responded to memoirs, created life soundtracks, made fictional memoirs from art prompts, and created a multimodal memoir. They also analyzed political speeches and social media for personal truths, analyzed tropes in life stories, and watched a documentary to compare autobiography and biography. The memoir work represented an opening up of what counts as story in many forms as it allowed for a perspectival view of story that extends beyond representational or mimetic (forms that look or sound like what they are intended to represent; Eisner, 2002, p. 15).

To prepare to write their own memoir, Molly designed a series of experiences to explore how memoir is taken up across different forms. Inviting students to see memoir in unexpected shapes, Molly set up six art stations around the classroom: a photograph (Dorothea Lange’s *Migrant Mother* [1936]); three paintings (Jacques Louis David’s *The Death of Marat* [1793], William H. Johnson’s *Lil’ Sis* [1944], and George Tooker’s *Government Bureau* [1955]); an illustration (Raymond Pettibon’s *What Makes a Man Start Fires*? [1982]); and a dance on DVD (Martha Graham’s *Night Journey* [2002]). Viewers were asked to examine them in groups under guiding questions: (1) What kind of story can you create from an image? (2) How could a piece of art be a memoir text? Molly provided each group with an artist’s statement
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about the piece and biographical information on the artist, inviting students to weigh in on whether these artworks could be considered memoir texts. Through these arts pieces, students considered multiple ways of telling a story, which served to scaffold their multimodal memoir. Writing their multimodal memoirs was a place to experiment with forms of representation and/or modality and to make conscious and deliberate considerations about “how to tell their story” most effectively to an audience in a range of modes within and beyond print.

Molly asked students to consider different kinds of journeys they had taken (mental, geographical, spiritual) and to view their memoir not as a retelling of one journey but as a “making sense of it.” Molly described to students that their multimodal work was “extending what it means to tell a memoir.” The range and variation of student choices included photo essay, photography, vocal performance, essay, podcast, slideshow, spoken word, song lyrics, percussion piece, and family history book. “How do you best tell your story?” Molly asked. “Words? Images? Songs?” While the multimodal memoirs drew students’ attention to conscious and deliberate considerations involved in storytelling and to how meaning is enabled and constricted within and across a range of forms including but not limited to print, it also involved students in the process of constructing their lives as stories.

Haley, a theater major, chose to create a book about her family history. As a self-described “non-visual-artist” working inside a new form, she designed an original cover, assembled the pages, wrote six chapters, hand-wrote the text in script, and tipped in photographs. Haley’s process, like many students’, took several turns. Originally setting out to tell the story of her family’s religious journey, Haley turned to the subject of family history more broadly when the process of researching led her to discover a proliferation of stories about family relationships including how her parents met and back several generations to how her grandparents and great grandparents met.

Wrestling with the dilemma of how to represent multiple stories (including the discovery that her grandmother and grandfather had very different versions of the story of how they met!), she eventually decided on the narrative technique of juxtaposition and vignettes to render differing perspectives, an idea she had encountered the year prior while reading Cisneros’s *The House on Mango Street*. This interplay between the vignettes from literature and multimodal stories is one example of the many ways that art as story heightened an emphasis on form and content and built an organic platform for intertextual connections. On completion of the project she told me:
I really liked that project because... the project for me was like a journey in itself, because I started out doing my religion, and how I feel, and how I used to be... and it was like, okay, religion starts with family history, and then I just scratched out the religion, and wrote about my family history, and I learned about my family, and it made me learn about myself in the process, so it was a really cool project.

For Haley and for others, the form of the project evolved through her participation with it in a journey of discovery and shifting content. She told me that she actually ended up focusing the book on her great grandparents because she was drawn to “the era that they lived, the 20s” and to their story—because “[I] just thought it was very cool and romantic because she was all high class and stuff, and he was like, he owned a fruit cart.” Central to Haley’s process was working the dialectic of interpretation and production, seeking and interpreting story and finding ways to represent it. Through this process, Haley decided that she could capture her family story best through chapters told from different perspectives in what she called “poetic form” and with attention to the photographic layout and lettering. She described this process as both “fun” but “full of challenges”:

I had to interview my grandma... and I reached out to my cousin who I haven’t talked to since she was seven... Then, like I had to redo all 21 pages because of my punctuation. Godawful. I improved on that a lot. And I learned poetic kinds of forms. ’Cause I wanted it more poetic than I normally do. So I was like experimenting with metaphors and stuff so designing the thing was a lot of work... I didn’t have a vision going into it of what the book would look like but I wanted it to pop out so people would know it’s my family, so visual art was incorporated too, but it was really different from the way I pictured it to the way it turned out, which is a good thing sometimes.

Haley’s comments convey what it meant for her to grapple inside of a new form, the “experimenting” that was a necessary part of “designing” and her felt sense of uncertainty in an artistic process as it was unfolding. She explains the way she had to navigate the visual and the verbal modes in new ways through experimentation with metaphor and the grueling process she encountered in doing (and redoing) all the lettering and pages by hand. She also conveys the sense that she wasn’t just “incorporating” what she already knew in an art form but “learning” through making. As Haley encountered multiple versions of her family history from the family members themselves, she quickly discovered that the story didn’t exist somewhere a priori; rather, she would have to construct it.

Haley’s multimodal memoir process serves as one example of how
students navigated the constraints and possibilities of working inside of new forms. Haley’s experience is also suggestive of the ways that students constructed the telling of life stories and how that construction involved decisions about what to tell and how to tell it. Through the process of telling her family history as a handmade book, Haley negotiated the construction of text and life stories as perspectival, interpreted, and told. Working with and within multiple stories and forms cultivated critical and agentive ways of thinking as students negotiated form and content, how a story is told, and the relationship between how it is told and what it means.

Discussion and Implications

Art as story at Tobin was a way to reframe the arts in and of students’ lives as something central to literacy learning. It provided a relational aesthetic that foregrounds the negotiation of meaning in relation to others. And it brought attention to how all stories are constructed within forms of media that influence what can be told and understood.

To students, this arts-based approach did feel like “new school,” prompting them to rethink what it means to learn through art. Given that the 47 students in Lorraine’s and Molly’s classes had come to Tobin from more than 35 different middle schools across the city, it’s telling that a consistent refrain was how different learning at Tobin was for them. Students noted a difference between their experience and experiences that involved more “listening to the teacher” (Raquel), “reading a book and writing an essay” (Melinda), and “taking out a textbook, answering questions, and then having a test” (Alex). Art helped students to see text as less autonomous and fixed or something from which to extract a singular meaning. And, it opened up a full range of forms of text as platforms for inquiry and sense-making. It set the conditions for what Bourriaud (1998) has called “an arena of exchange” where the embodied, aesthetic aspects of art “tighten the space of relations” among participants and encourage ongoing inquiry and dialogue. As Greene (1995) has argued, “painting, literature, theater, film—all open doors and move persons to transform. We want to enable all sorts of young people to realize that they have the right to find works of art meaningful against their own lived lives” (p. 150). Having the “right to find works of art meaningful” at Tobin involved art as a platform for relational engagement with the world, with each other, with forms of meaning, and with themselves.

Whereas art across the curriculum is often conceptualized and justified in the service of another subject, at Tobin the relationship between art
and literacy was so permeable and reciprocal that some students did not view their work as “literacy learning through art” but instead, the other way around. When I asked 10th-grader Ariana how art played a role in her English class, she replied without hesitation: “For me, it’s the other way around! I’m into media and English plays into media for me, like using words to my advantage... making a thesis... having an idea... and putting yourself out there... putting your own opinion in your work and it reflects you.” The art and story juxtaposition was so seamless to students that it seemed to disrupt the linearity embedded in the notion of learning “through art.”

In students’ minds, this uptake of art made it central to “academic work” and did not conform to the logic of an art/academic binary. Students did not feel they had to choose between art and academics, and the school’s college admissions rate and higher-than-district-average state scores in language arts were a testament to the ways in which this work was, as one student described, “academically prosperous.” With a student population characterized as 52 percent economically disadvantaged, 95 percent of students in 2016 at Tobin (the year the ninth-grade students in this study graduated) scored proficient on the state English test, well above the district average of 52 percent and the state average of 70 percent. Whereas art is often considered a frill for those already proficient, data from the school challenge that assumption and suggest that arts-based literacies might actually be not only academically prosperous but also an equalizer across various levels of preparedness in students; the data show a slim 6 percent variation between the scores of students who qualified for free or reduced-price lunch and those who did not. While teachers were still required to teach to state standards, they seemed to be able to teach arts-based literacies in ways that were able to meet and exceed those standards while providing deeply relational, inquiry-based, and often transformative experiences for a diverse group of students. This potential was not met by engaging with art primarily as an object or skill or as a tool or hook for engagement. It was not met by including art primarily as ornamentation, or pleasure, or enrichment, or as an alternative but mimetic representation of meaning. Rather, it was met by positioning art as the material and processes through which to engage the work of ongoing inquiry.

Since one does not need to be an artist to engage with stories, stories across many forms can be a viable way of approaching arts-based literacy pedagogy that is open to all teachers and all students. It is important to point
out that the teachers in both classrooms were first and foremost English teachers; while Lorraine leaned toward identification as an artist, Molly identified as “not an artist.” Both teachers were clear with me about not making claims to be teaching art and instead, they viewed this work as synergistic with rich studio arts pedagogy.

More work is needed that examines arts-based pedagogy in different contexts, particularly audiences beyond students who already identify with art in an arts-based school. Molly, having previously taught in an under-resourced, traditional school, described her strategy of integrating literacy, art, and multimodality as borne out of a felt necessity to engage students in ways that went beyond the restrictive curriculum that she was required to teach. She also argued that such practice prepared her to do this work minimally and without extensive resources. Both teachers had interactive whiteboards but consistently took up this work with few additional materials. For both Lorraine and Molly, the impulse for innovation was situated within and against the restrictions of public school mandates, and each took up this tension as a challenge to their own capacity for innovation. Lorraine told me, “It’s kind of what makes it fun though, because it’s like dancing within chains . . . trying to figure out . . . OK let’s meet the [standard] . . . let’s find another way to do this.”

Students and teachers seemed to share an understanding that these opportunities should not be limited to those already interested in art (i.e., only in an arts-based school) but to all students as part of a diverse, humanizing curriculum. Ninth grader Joyce’s argument that “teenagers these days, they all mostly like some kind of art, and they can all relate” does invite the consideration of a democratic vision for arts learning that draws on the arts as already present in students’ lives and raises questions about what the arts offer in an age of multimodalities. Since literacy, for example, extends across disciplines of the curriculum, are there other spaces where conceptualizing art as story might be a component of arts-based learning beyond the English classroom as part of a vision for democratic and transformative schooling more broadly? With an evolving communicative landscape, insights from across art and other disciplines will be necessary to imagine a more synergistic and generative relationship between art and other kinds of school learning. I’ve argued here that art as story lends itself well to an English classroom; in what ways are the affordances of art specific and unique to other disciplines? Might art as story work as a framework for life science? And/or what framings could be useful and particular to those contexts?

Teachers and students who can speak to what it means to do this work bring important insights to advancing theory and practice. Practitioner in-
inquiry (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009) as “research into practice” that engages both practical and theoretical knowledge is one way to advance our individual and collective understandings of what it means to teach and learn through art in a sustained way. Keeping these voices central to research should be part of efforts going forward; teacher and student insights will be needed to advance and theorize innovative interdisciplinary work that is already taking place, to guard against a reductive inclusion of art, and to generate more robust conversations about shared goals and unique affordances of learning through and with art in different disciplines. Challenging the de-aesthetification of literacy education (Spivak, 2012) and the notion that art is a frill and in opposition to more useful applied skills, research into arts-based literacy teaching and learning can reframe arguments for art from sociocultural and critical perspectives as part of a twenty-first-century social imperative. The work of students and teachers at Tobin offers up consideration of how art-based learning could be “new school” for our times, an approach to learning that foregrounds relational contexts of learning, draws energy from diverse ways of knowing, challenges the perceived art/academic binary, and fundamentally relies on the affordances of art for ongoing inquiry.

Notes

1. STEM to STEAM is an initiative out of The Rhode Island School of Design that argues for the inclusion of art and design in initiatives aimed at cultivating innovation; see http://stemtosteam.org/.

2. The 21st Century Skills Arts Map is a resource for educators, administrators, and policymakers that maps intersections between twenty-first-century skills and the arts.

3. Though the blurring of “English” (and its derivations) and “literacy” renders them nearly synonymous, throughout the article I use the term literacy in reference to pedagogy and English as the typical name for the course in secondary schools, including the classes in this study’s setting.

4. All student and place names are pseudonyms. The students referred to their teachers as Ms. Ustaris and Ms. Thacker, but throughout the article I refer to them as I did in our work together as Lorraine and Molly. The teachers elected to be named in publications resulting from the study, an option I included in the IRB process.

5. School demographic and performance data in this (context) section as well is in the final (discussion) section were derived from the state’s Department of Education website, not included in the references to preserve anonymity.

6. The name of the cousin in the quotation has been changed to match the pseudonym of Alyssa, as they shared the same name.

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Jessica Whitelaw teaches courses in literature and literacies, teacher education, and educational leadership at the University of Pennsylvania’s Graduate School of Education. Her research focuses on intersections among the arts, literacies, and critical inquiry.