

**Raising voices through the arts:  
Creating spaces for writing for marginalized groups of women**

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**Abstract:** This article focuses on the use of various art forms to prompt written expression as a segue to liberating voices of marginalized adult women learners. The goal is to demonstrate the development of personal voice and written expression as it progresses over time and experience with two different groups of marginalized women.

## **Background**

This paper describes the use of various art forms to prompt written expression as a segue to liberating voices of marginalized adult women learners. Our goal is to demonstrate the development of personal voice and written expression as it progresses over time and experience. This will be illustrated through examples from our work with 2 groups of women at different stages of their writing experience and in different positions in life: one group are novice writers in Hope House, a recovery home, and the second group are more advanced writers, The Women's Writing Group, who are in transition after being released from prison and have been writing for several years.

The paper begins with a literature review of the three theoretical frameworks informing our research: aesthetic education and the role of art forms in literacy development, developmental writing theory as an instrument for raising learners' voice, and feminist pedagogy. We will continue with excerpts of the women's writing as they exemplify the development of voice through writing. In conclusion, we will discuss the progression of writing in these two groups and the significance of art in this process.

## **Theoretical Framework**

*There is no human being, no matter what age, who cannot be energized and enlarged when provided opportunities to sing, to say, to inscribe, to render, to show.*

(Maxine Green, 2001, p. 202)

*Aesthetic education, the arts and the development of literacy.* The development and advancement of learners' literacy has been investigated for many years (Dyson, 1994, 2003; Gee, 1985, 1986, 2001; Kress, 1997; Lankshear & Knobel; 2003; Smith 1994, 1998, 2007). Ongoing research is

looking at ways to enrich learners' experiences. One of the ways in which this can be done is through aesthetic education (Berghoff, Borgmann & Parr, 2003)

Aesthetic education views the learner as actively engaged with the arts through open ended questions which are designed to encourage critical dialogues and promote authentic learning experiences. Actively engaging with aesthetics while reading and writing, allows for the surfacing and inclusion of uncertainties, promoting openness toward pluralism and diversified ways of knowing, allowing us to enter the imagined experience of others and help us cross barriers that seem to divide us (Berleant, 1991; Dewey, 1934; Greene, 1995; hooks, 1994).

The foundation of aesthetic education lies within the philosophical questioning of traditional education. Dewey (1934) originally separated the two types of education by looking at the relationship between education and experience. He was referring to an experience that would engage the learner and “promote having desirable future experiences” (p.27). Art, according to Dewey, provides the learner access to experiences of others, expanding and enriching the personal milieu with new meaning and empathy.

Greene (2001) extends Dewey's philosophy discussing learners' interaction with works of art. She argues that it is through aesthetic education that “the learner must break with the taken-for-granted, what some call the ‘natural attitude,’ and look through the lenses of various ways of knowing, seeing, and feeling in a conscious endeavor to impose different orders upon experience” (p. 5). The aesthetic experience provides learners with the possibilities to understand and value knowledge from alternative perspectives.

Learners become validated as they recognize that there are multiple ways of knowing, giving them the freedom to create new meanings. Thus, aesthetic education is an “intentional undertaking designed to nurture appreciative, reflective, cultural participatory engagement with

the arts by enabling learners to notice what is there to be noticed” (p.6). As a result, new connections are made in experience, new patterns are formed, new vistas are opened.

Imagination fosters the learners’ ability to envision that a text (auditory, visual and/or written) may possibly hold more than one perspective or one way of understanding. Greene (1995) stated that “...the role of imagination...is to awaken, to disclose the ordinarily unseen, unheard, and unexpected” (p. 28). She explains that “the learner must approach [the text] from the vantage point of her or his lived situation, that is, in accord with a distinctive point of view and interest” (p. 31). Imagination, then, provides access to a text’s unseen possibilities.

As such, the primary concern of education is not merely to teach reading and writing, but rather to free people “to make sense of their actual lived situations -not only cognitively, but perceptually, imaginatively, affectively ... [to discover that] there is no end to it, that there is always more to see, to learn, to feel” (Greene, 2001 p.206). Feeling is a prominent component in the construction of meaning as one reads and writes any text. This may apply to most learners, however, it is extremely relevant to marginalized individuals who have been historically silenced and for whom literacy has the emancipatory potential for liberating their voices.

When we approach a text and ask not only what happens within it, but also what happens to *us* when we read into it, we are activating an aesthetic reading position, searching for meaning somewhere between the text and ourselves (Ehrenworth & Labbo, 2003; Rosenblatt, 1978). Learners listening to music or observing a visual presentation can interact with these texts, notice what there is to be noticed and have the freedom to find personal meaning in them. Responding in writing or drawing to texts gives learners power of authorship with the potential of representing their authentic voices (Baxter-Magolda & King, 2004).

*Voice...how do we know it and how do we capture it?*  
(Hewey, 1996 p. 25)

*Developmental writing theory and the raising of learners' voices.* Voice is a person's attempt to state "I am", to take responsibility of authoring one's own life, moving from object to subject (hooks, 1994). Expressing one's self in speaking, writing or creating works of art is at the heart of the process of finding one's voice and legitimizing it (Blake, 1995; Christensen, 2000; Magolda & King, 2004). By listening to students' voices in educational settings, we acknowledge their voices as determining presence, power, and agency. Voices expressed in writing can be located within two interwoven dynamics: as a tool for humanizing writing processes and products, or as a tool for developing social and political presence. Cultivating and recognizing the uniqueness of every voice in the classroom signifies the positive valuation of each of our experiences and makes us more acutely aware of each other's presence, of our commonalities and differences (hooks, 1994; Lensmire, 1991; Cook-Sather, 2003)

Writing about her work with preadolescent girls, Blake (1995) shows how writing within a group setting "...provides [students] with both a private and public format to construct and reconstruct the texts of their lives, thereby beginning to name, define describe, explore and transform" their lives (pg.166). Learners begin to value writing as a means of "...expressing that which they had never been comfortable expressing before" (pg.176), and it has the possibility of raising genuine voices, as Hewey (1996) writes, "Let go. Be real. Take risks. Speak from your heart. Write about what is meaningful to you. Stand up for yourself and let yourself be heard" (pg. 30). Creating safe spaces in our classrooms for voices to be raised is an integral part of a successful and positive learning experience. The stories that emerge are often new insights to one's own experiences and that of others'. Stories are very humanizing, and telling/listening to them arouses caring and compassion (Rossiter & Clark, 2007).

*To listen to one another is an exercise in recognition. It also ensures that no student remains invisible in the classroom*  
(hooks, 1994, 41)

*Feminist Pedagogy in the Classroom.* Our classrooms are based on concepts of critical postmodern feminist pedagogy, which outlines six guiding principles for creating an inclusive classroom that supports and promotes learning for all students: 1) Students' experiences are central to teaching and learning; 2) Creating safe spaces for students to speak freely, and for teachers to affirm students' perceptions and experiences, allowing students to, potentially, assume ownership and take action in their lives; 3) Raising issues of power and agency, thus giving students opportunities to rewrite relationships between centers and margins; 4) Raising issues of diversity to allow for the reconfiguration of social boundaries; 5) Presenting students with a language of critique and possibility; 6) Acknowledging multiple ways of knowing as a basis for including all students in the educational discourse (Belenky et al., 1986; Brady & Dentith, 2001; Sayles-Hannon, 2007; Webb, Allen & Walker 2002).

Our groups are focused on our students' lives, narratives, concerns, and their relationships with the world. We promote self-empowerment through dialogue and community support, leading in many cases, to the re-envisioning of power relationships and agency. And we acknowledge multiple ways of knowing by bringing into our classrooms multiple modalities for teaching and multiple semiotic systems, opening up possibilities for engaging our diverse learners and allowing them to find their personal comfort zone of expression (Knobel & Lankshear, 2006; Siegel, 2006).

## **The process**

We are working with 2 groups of adult women learners, all of whom are marginalized by society because of being poor and either in recovery from addiction and/or in transition after incarceration. All are voluntary participants in the literacy groups. The women in Hope House are regrouping after experiences of addiction and various emotional and mental traumas. This is a transient population that stays in the home for as long as needed for recovery, reestablishing healthy life patterns and career retraining. They are, however, free to leave at any time and some do so after only a short stay. The literacy class is held weekly (2 hours/session). Two of the women have been in the class for over a year while the others range from a few months to a few days. Most of the women have a high school diploma.

The women in transition after incarceration - who we named The Women's Writing Group- meet once a month to talk and write about their experiences. This group has been meeting monthly (5 hours/session) for the past 5 years, although some of the members have joined more recently (Pinhasi-Vittorio & Martinsons, in press). All of the women are working on or have achieved undergraduate or graduate degrees. Some of the women live freely in the community, while others are in an earlier stage of transition and some of their activities are supervised.

The experiences of these two groups lie at the intersection of writing and aesthetic education, with development contingent upon time and experience. The novice writers - the women in Hope House – were eager to express themselves orally, although mostly hesitant and reluctant to write. In order to break through this inhibition, different forms of art were introduced to the classroom, resulting in increased written expression. The more experienced writers, The Women's Writing Group, have long passed the stage of inhibition in writing, and comfortably embrace the process

*Emergent writing.* The literacy classes at Hope House have two goals: teaching the women about the power of language and trying to guide them in stepping out of their silence, the result of oppression, fear and humiliating experiences. With the use of narrative forms, oral and written, the women's voices are given space and recognition as they learn to name themselves and their worlds, possibilities and hope.

Yet writing has always been a problem here: "I can't write" or "I don't feel like writing" has been an almost automatic response to suggestions of writing in class. Part of the resistance is fear of exposing perceived weakness in spelling, language or formal writing processes. Another part is about voice: "I have nothing to write about" - questioning the merit of their stories; and there is fear of touching painful personal experiences, reawakening issues that were buried, silenced. And some of the resistance is just general fatigue.

One of the activities chosen to ease the participants into writing was a photography project based on an idea from Zana Briski's film *Born into Brothels* (Ross Kaufman & Zana Briski, THINKFilm). Students were given disposable cameras and asked to take pictures of anything they felt was significant in their lives. When the pictures were developed, the women chose one photo and told why they took it. These texts were either self-written or dictated and the results were strong personal narratives resonating with the authentic voices of the writers (Ben-Yosef, in press). Jane, who was a long time resident and much older than the others, was an avid reader of historical novels about which she would talk at length, but during the two years she was part of the class, she never wanted to write nor talk about anything personal. The day her pictures were developed, she dictated the following text:

*This is the tree in the back yard.  
I noticed it from the corner of my eye:  
it is silver and grey and perfectly formed.  
The History Channel was talking about ghost ships,  
so I started calling it my ghost tree.*



*I happened to notice it from the corner of my eye.*

At another time, music was brought in to promote writing, prompting the students to reflect on the music itself and/or on their experience of “being” in the music. The activity began with a song by Evora, a singer from the Cape Verde Islands, who sings in a local dialect of Portuguese. The piece was chosen to provide an access point through affinity with the female singer, yet it was in a foreign language which made it abstract enough to allow listeners to connect to the music in any way they felt appropriate. The students were asked to free-write as they responded to this music.

Delia wrote:

*I just let my mind wander into the depths of the music  
as it caresses every inch of my soul.  
Music brings me joy, sadness, tranquility.  
It speaks for me when I cannot.  
The sad, melancholy, melodies of my heart.  
I try to like music that is positive  
but I'm drawn to the music that expresses my sadness.  
Dreams of better times, calm, water,  
sailing on a faraway ocean of hope, of peace, of serenity,  
where the twilight turns to starlight.*

Vera didn't want to write. She had just come to Hope House a few hours earlier and didn't feel connected to the group. As the music was playing and all the others were “writing without lifting the pen” (Elbow, 1998), Vera just sat there, gazing at her feet. Bea, who seemed intensely engaged in her writing, asked to share:

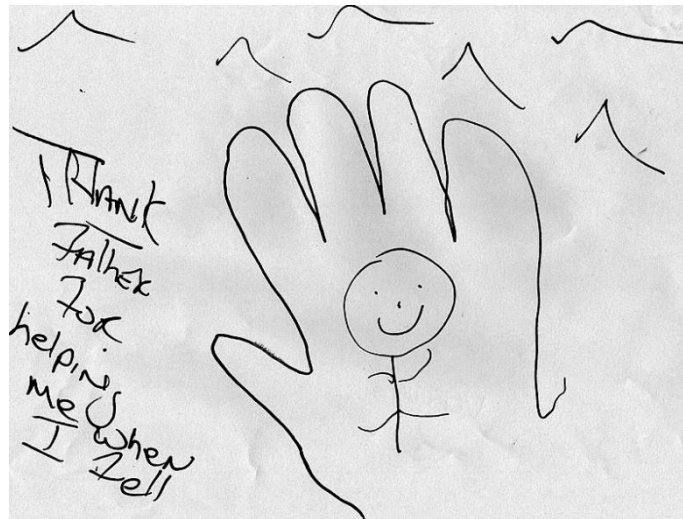
*I'm alone.  
I ain't got no change for the phone  
And I'm scared  
I feel trapped  
I hate how I got here  
Don't know when I'll get out.  
That's wacked and that's a fact.*

*Life's on borrowed time  
It's on a loan  
Angels bargained for me  
And I'm back  
To stand alone  
My heart's pumpin' fast  
And I'm all alone  
My heart is pumpin' faster  
And I'm all alone  
I'm on my own*

After reading, she explained that she had just survived another of many suicide attempts, “*I had flat-lined this time, but they brought me back*”, that she had lost her children and feels as if she is drowning with the Titanic. Someone mentioned that she may not realize this yet but she had reached a safe harbor in the recovery house. By this point Vera was sobbing uncontrollably. We offered tissues, water, asked if she wanted to leave the class, which was obviously distressing her. She wanted to stay.

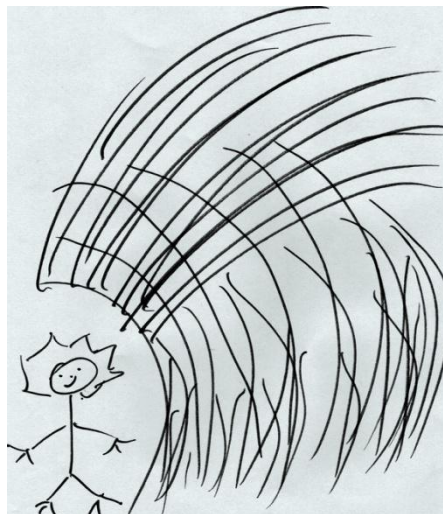
For the next activity the music was “Let me fall”, an English language song from Cirque du Soleil (Quidam), beginning with the refrain “Let me fall, let me fly...” The students were asked to either free-write or draw as they listened to the song. Vera had calmed down and was very eager to draw although she kept repeating “I can't draw” as she was setting up her paper. When the song ended she was now very eager to share her work. First she apologized for crying and disrupting the class and explained that she too, like Bea, had gone through several suicide

attempts and had been approached by social services to give her son up for adoption. Her history was full of stumbles, drugs, trying to buy friendship, she told us.



*I can't draw but this is a picture of my birds, my angels, and this is the hand of the Father holding me and catching me when I fall. His hand is always stretched out to us, we just have to reach for it. He won't let me fall again. This song was like a prayer. Thank you Father*

Ivy also responded to the song in drawing. She drew the following picture and dictated her narrative:



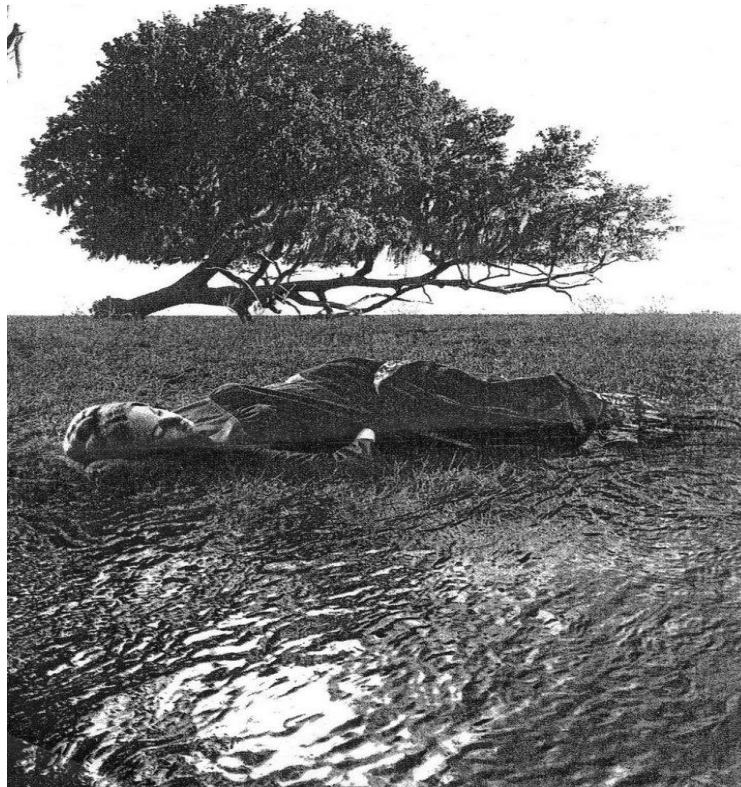
*This is a picture of the wind blowing in all directions. It's cold outside and I forgot my coat. But the music is keeping me warm and I won't fall. I'm strong.*

Our classes are emancipatory in the Freirean sense of students realizing that as they tell about their lives, they are gaining power: the power to name and value their own experiences, their feelings, their dreams; the power to value their lives; the power to appreciate themselves as women who are struggling. Through telling and writing their stories they begin locating themselves in their own histories and in supportive communities, and they begin reclaiming their authentic voices, bringing them to the surface from their hiding places deep inside.

Some manage to reclaim power as women who despite their past experiences and current struggles, have hope. They manage to leave their immediate being and see a future, a new life, as is evident in Dina's writing which sprang forth one day after a long silence:

*I am Dina. I live in a sober house.  
I say to myself every day that  
I can live a normal life like  
I once shared with my son and family.  
I hope my family notices how hard  
I'm working to get back their love that  
I neglected for so long.  
I dream that one day soon  
I can have my life back together again.  
I am Dina. I live in a sober house*

*Experienced writing.* Writing plays a significant role for members of The Women's Writing Group. Unlike the women in Hope House, most are more experienced writers since they have been engaging in this activity for several years. They write mostly in response to various texts: literary, visual, auditory (Pinhasi-Vittorio & Martinson, in press). In one of the meetings the group was introduced to a black and white photographic rendition of a painting depicting a young woman lying on the grass near water, an uprooted tree in the background.



The picture did not have a title nor was it familiar to the group and this allowed them to transact with the work of art and express their own thoughts evoked by this image. The idea of being intimate with both one's thoughts and the work of art forced them to look closely and notice what is only noticeable to the specific reader/writer creating a unique reading experience and encouraging the release of imagination (Green, 1995, 2001; Rosenblatt, 1994, 1995).

Mira, looked at the picture intensely. Her glance moved between the picture and her empty page for a while and finally she began writing. Twenty minutes later, the group was ready to share. Mira was smiling as she read:

*Where do I go when what I thought was a relatively safe life becomes uprooted? What I thought was so solid has become muddy, sandy, simply hard to walk on a straight path. Although the sun is shining on me, it can't reach my insides. I can't make it. I am drowning in the sea of life. But wait, something or someone is preventing me from taking that plunge. Let me just rest for a minute and weigh out my options. I'm not over the edge, yet, maybe I can build a solid foundation and re-root my life.*

Everybody clapped; we loved her piece. In her response to the photograph, Mira positioned herself as the women lying on the grass under the tree. Her transaction with the painting reflects the process she was going through as she transitioned to life outside prison, her hope of “building a solid foundation” and creating a new beginning.

Kerry blushed a bit when it was her turn to share:

*Reflections of my youth come to me in a dream.  
Beautiful green grass meshed with the Delaware River  
where I mischievously played as a child.  
A fallen tree represents summers  
that no longer exist  
because of the passing of my Grammy.  
How I long to be in Pennsylvania again!*

Kerry’s writing was also drawn from her own experience. For her, the photo evoked childhood memories upon which she reflected nostalgically.

Heloise’s (real name, at the writer’s request), a practicing reverend who empowers the group with her positive outlook, cleared her throat and read in a confident voice:

*When I laid down for a short rest I was taken into the land of dreams. I  
saw the water and knew that God is water and calming.  
I saw the tree and I remembered the story of the Garden of Eden. When  
Adam & Eve ate from the tree of knowledge and everything went out of whack.  
So as I look at this tree uprooted, yet still in sight, I rest upon the green  
grass, near the water’s edge and say thank you God for your peace which  
surpasses understanding.*

The group was really taken by this poem and several women commented on the spirituality of both Heloise and her text. Her strong beliefs colored her transaction with the photo in religious tones and metaphors. Through “deep noticing” (Holzer, 2007) Heloise saw God pervasive in all the pictorial elements, prompting her to thank Him for His understanding and compassion.

Rosenblatt (1994, 1995) saw the “poem as an event” (a meaningful reading experience), which is different every time it is activated by different readers. Even the same reader at different points of time, may experience a different event. Although we introduced the same photo to the whole group, each woman responded differently based upon her own background, culture, experiences and vernacular literacies (Barton & Hamilton, 1998). Each of the women brought different meaning to the same prompt: while Mira positioned herself as the woman and metaphorically wrote about her transition from incarceration to freedom, Kim delved into her childhood memories, and Heloise connected to her God.

### **Discussion**

Both programs focus on the development of voice through self-discovery and reflection, encouraged by aesthetic experiences (photography, arts, crafts, creative writing, critical reading and the sharing of personal stories). The written products are expressions of the surfacing and sounding of the women’s authentic voices. In both settings the freedom given to the learners to personally interpret and react to the work of art, allowed for raising voice through the use of imagination. The students learn to utilize the possibilities inherent in and the aesthetic value of writing for articulating their voice.

Experiencing the art was a segue to personal validation through written expression, “...putting the knower back into the known and claiming the power of their own minds and voices” (Belenky et al., 1986:19). This power to be authors of their own stories is embedded in the freedom the women had to choose the content of these stories and the style in which to represent themselves, without risk of scrutiny (Baxter-Magolda & King, 2004)). This freedom also extended to the activation of imagination which was the key element in these writing activities. Looking/ listening to the work of art, the women had to provide their own

interpretation of the piece as it is connected to their lives, creating new connections new patterns and new vistas (Green, 2005).

When the women at Hope House responded to the music they had to elicit their imaginations to create a web of images and translate them into a written text. Most women in this group were still in the emergent stage of writing in response to works of art, and their texts mostly describe the music and their response to it rather than creating a personal narrative. Bea's writing was unusual in her ability to recreate and describe a specific experience in her written response. In this emergent stage we noticed that the learners' responses to aesthetic prompts were, in general, limited to descriptions of moments or recent events, and had not yet developed into life stories indicative of having found independent and secure voices (Dina's story was more developed, but was unusual for the group).

On the other hand The Women's Writing Group responded to the visual elements in the photo by creating personal stories. Each woman created a completely different narrative based on the same photo originating from the writer's personal schematic knowledge (Spaniol & Bayen, 2002). Despite the fact that all 3 women had experienced life in prison and were in a process of transition, these experienced writers were able to connect to altogether different aspects of their lives from looking at the photo and their stories represent a strong voice stating "I am". They were able to go beyond their immediate personal experiences and reflect on their lives from a wider perspective and place their experiences in a larger context. Perhaps, this dynamic is an indication of more profound imaginations as well as broader linguistic and symbolic resources that the women have developed over time and experience, and that they were able to use for kindling, liberating and raising their voices.



The role of the work of art in these two learning contexts was different: the novice writers in Hope House relied on the work of art to prompt and trigger their writing, while the women of The Women's Writing Group use the work of art to enrich their writing and reflect their social/cultural experiences.

The two groups of women writers represent a marginalized population silenced and excluded from societal conversation due to their gender and/or race, and/or poverty and their specific histories. Adrienne Rich wrote that "where language and naming are power, silence is oppression, is violence." (1979). We believe that sounding one's voice is a human right, particularly in situations where it is a response to violent, silencing experiences as those our students have gone through. By using works of art, we prompt and enable the stirring and raising of personal voices, reifying narrative and validating the self.

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