


Chapter 6

Counter–Melodies and Creativity: Filling the Gaps in a Rural Colorado School

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ABSTRACT

This chapter provides an introduction to the Pre-Texts method for integrating civics, innovation, and literacy. It draws on the experience of Lindsay Bobyak and Sophie Brown in using Pre-Texts with elementary students as part of Creative Roots Collective, which provides educational opportunities in rural Colorado. This chapter provides tangible strategies for elementary teachers and educators which can improve literacy and oracy outcomes for students and bridge the gap between the idealism and practicality of a creative, collaborative, and co-owned classroom experience. The chapter provides vignettes of the arts-based protocol in action and breaks down the component Pre-Texts activities. Finally, the authors look at positive changes in student behavior and provide guidance for integrating Pre-Texts into the classroom.

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INTRODUCTION

The benefits of music and arts education are so widely evidenced (Hallam, 2015; Barton & Baguley, 2017; Lloyd, 2017; Creech et al., 2021 and Váradi, 2022) that our purpose here is not to convince the reader of the value of arts education. Neither is this chapter a polemic about how the arts have steadily been squeezed out of the public-school timetable and chronically under-resourced, despite 88% of Americans agreeing that arts education is a vital component of a well-rounded education (American Academy of Arts and Sciences, 2021, p. 5). Our starting point is that arts are important for their own sake and for supporting students in their wider education. This chapter discusses *how* to take this conviction into the classroom and use the arts to support literacy and other core competencies.

This chapter reflects on music and arts provision in a rural Colorado school on a day when the school would usually be closed. Lindsay Bobyak is a musician and teaching artist based in the Glenwood Springs area. In 2020, she set up Creative Roots Collective and began providing free music education and literacy support at Cactus Valley Elementary in 2020. Lindsay uses Pre-Texts, an arts-integration protocol for engaging with written texts, to support literacy, creativity, and socio-emotional development among her students. Lindsay was trained in the Pre-Texts method as part of her training with the Global Leaders Institute, a year-long program for musicians which provides tools for socially impactful careers.

We share our experience of using the arts to inspire a love of reading in students. This chapter is intended as an introduction and practical guide for elementary school teachers on how the Pre-Texts method can be integrated into their routines. Pre-Texts is a curation of practices which facilitate the integration of literacy, civics, and creativity while tackling compulsory texts. Wherever reading is required, be it English, History, or Social Science, higher education or elementary school, the Pre-Texts protocol can be activated. As Doris Sommer, the curator and developer of the protocol might say, “Press play to teach anything” (2021, p. 73). We draw on our experience as Pre-Texts facilitators, connecting the Pre-Texts guidelines to our experiences with elementary-age students. We hope this chapter provides a practical guide to a set of tools which can improve student outcomes and make teachers’ lives easier. These are tangible strategies that bridge the gap between the idealism and practicality of a creative, collaborative, and co-owned classroom experience.

The exposition gives some context of Lindsay Bobyak’s work at Cactus Valley Elementary School in Silt, Colorado, and a theoretical introduction to the Pre-Texts protocol. The development section is structured around each step of the Pre-Texts process. We discuss the rationale for each part of the process, share vignettes of how Pre-Texts looks in action, and integrate relevant literature which supports the

Counter-Melodies and Creativity

proposed practice. Each section features a summary box, presenting the instructions in a bare-bones format for easy reference, with our best advice for implementing each stage of the process. The recapitulation examines the role of reflection in this protocol and, by way of conclusion, we in turn reflect upon some of the impacts of using Pre-Texts at Cactus Valley. Our hope is that this chapter leads teachers to experiment with Pre-Texts and see first-hand how these practices can promote oracy, foster a love of reading, and develop intrinsic motivation for learning.

EXPOSITION

It's Friday morning at the usual time. The violins have been put away after a morning of group and individual lessons. The corridors are quieter than on normal days – school isn't in session at Cactus Valley Elementary, yet the library is abuzz with quiet concentration. The Creative Roots Students are working with Ray Bradbury's "All Summer in a Day." We are led into a discussion of bullying. How does it make the students feel reading the story aloud versus in their head? What stories of bullying do they have in their own lives?

The smallest fourth grader pipes up: "We should just rewrite the story, with a new character that stands up for Margot!"

It is put to a vote, suggestions are made. The class decides to put on a play where they can change the outcome for Margot and rewrite the scene of classroom bullying. A timer is set for 15 minutes. Students set to work creating a stage and props and allocating characters. As ever, we end with the question, "What did we do?"

"We rewrote the story!"

"We stopped the bullying!"

"We planned the lesson for you, Miss Lindsay!"

We brought together literacy, art, and civic agency.

What Is Creative Roots Collective?

Creative Roots Collective (CRC) was started by Lindsay Bobyak in 2020. It is a collective impact initiative focused on bringing organizations together to serve underserved students in rural Colorado. In that state, "the top 1% take home 17.2% of all the income" with rural Colorado being "home to the most — and least — extreme income inequality in the state" (Economic Policy Institute, 2018). The mountains between Denver and Grand Junction have a number of towns, none larger than 20,000 people. In these mountain towns, the economic disparity of the United States is felt acutely, and economic inequality is most extreme near ski towns (Sanchez, 2018).

The area is home to Aspen, the most expensive ski town in America, where Red Mountain (nicknamed “Billionaire Mountain”) boasts some of the most expensive real estate in the country. The wealth gap between residents of Billionaire Mountain and the towns that work to support the ski industry is staggering. In Pitkin County, the most unequal county in the state where Aspen is situated, the top 1% of income earners make 72.2 times more than the bottom 99% (Sanchez, 2018).

This local wealth feeds into school provision. The school district of Aspen, catering to little under 1,600 students, works with an annual revenue of \$45,674,000, 85% of which is from local funding sources, spending an average of \$20,850 per student each year. The Garfield County school district, where Cactus Valley Elementary is situated and CRC operates, caters for more than 4,500 students and has an annual revenue of \$66,871,000, 43.1% of which comes from local funding. The average spending per student is just \$10,902 (US News, n.d.). Aspen’s school district revenue is on the rise “thanks to more state funding, higher assessed property values boosting the tax base and ever-growing community support” (Williams, 2021). Meanwhile, Garfield County’s schools operate a 4-day work week due to budget constraints. Students in Garfield County need educational opportunities, as well as childcare, on Fridays when school is not in session. High living costs force many caregivers to hold multiple jobs, often in the service sector supporting nearby resorts. For many parents taking Friday off work to look after their children is unfeasible.¹

The education gap extends to opportunities outside of school. There are several large non-profit music organizations based in the Aspen and Vail area, but their programming reach doesn’t extend much past their immediate area due to geographic, financial, and staffing limitations.

Further education gaps exist for Hispanic and Latine students, and the disparities start early (Sanchez, 2018). According to the National Assessment of Educational Progress in 2022, the percentage of Hispanic and Latine students in Colorado who are at or above the required proficiency in 8th grade is 19.2%, as compared with 43.5% among white students (NAEP, 2022). Of the students enrolled in CRC, 75% are Hispanic or Latine. 50% are learning English as a second language.

This is the gap which CRC steps into, providing programming on Fridays for 4th and 5th-grade students with a focus on the arts, literacy, and music. Creative Roots students are selected by school staff and counsellors based on family needs (i.e., childcare), educational needs (such as reading comprehension), and social needs (confidence building and socio-emotional support). CRC removes barriers to music education and high-level academic instruction on a day when school is not in session. Partnership with the Cactus Valley Elementary School allows students to use their familiar learning space to access educational programming, offering third-space learning opportunities at a location already in their routines.

Counter-Melodies and Creativity

Students enrolled in CRC arrive at the elementary school at 9 am. The lucky few who have an early drop off due to working parents help get the music room and cafeteria set up for the program day. Carpet squares and music stands are set up for the music portion of the morning and assorted crafting supplies and books are spread out amongst the cafeteria tables in preparation for Pre-Texts later in the day. The morning starts with music, from 9-10:30. As the rest of the students arrive, everyone is unpacking their violins, getting tuned, and warming up while everyone settles in. The music portion of the day consists of both group and 1:1 lessons. The Roaring Fork Youth Orchestra is a great supporter of these violin lessons, providing the instruments and funding the individual sessions, which are delivered by Shaunna Wilsky. Many CRC students have gone on to become members of the youth orchestra as they move on to Middle School.

Once the clock hits 10:30 everyone gets a break, and then the Pre-Texts portion of the day runs until 12 pm. At the end of the day, students are sent home with a packed lunch prepared by the local food pantry. Families can request additional meals if they need assistance with food for other children.

A Quick Look at Pre-Texts

The entire Pre-Texts practice hinges on the prompt, “Use this text to make art.” A text is read aloud while students draw or create cardboard book covers. Students ask the text a question and an arts-based activity is proposed or co-created - usually a combination of both with students at this age level. Each session ends with a prompt for reflection, “What did we do?” Through this process, texts become the basis for play and co-created interpretive activities.

I (Sophie) met Lindsay through an internship with Harvard Cultural Agents, which involved training in the Pre-Texts method and partnership with a community-based organization to support the implementation of the protocol. I worked alongside Lindsay supporting a 5-week summer literacy and music program with CRC students, joining via Zoom and finally flying from Canada to Colorado to deliver an in-person summer camp, open to any 5th Grade students at Cactus Valley. The aim of the summer camp was a literacy and study skills booster before students started middle school. As we partnered with Riverside Middle School to hold the camp there, this gave students a chance to explore their new school and acclimatize to the space.

Students in CRC are engaging in texts which are one or two reading grades beyond their age group. Yet through the Pre-Texts protocol, challenging texts become an excuse for play, which allows participants to get over their fear of reading (Cultural Agents, *Manual for Facilitators*). Through arts integration, difficulty is recharacterized as

a creative opportunity. The multi-modality of Pre-Texts complements research that students are generally multimodal learners, meaning that “their learning involves multisensory and cross-modalities where information is conveyed through more than one mode (e.g., image, sound, gesture, posture, gaze, talk, text, and movement” (O’Neill & Schmidt, 2017, p. 188). These modes “interact in new and innovative ways to create new forms of communication, representation, and expression” (ibid.).

A pretext is a “reason given in justification of a course of action that is not the real reason” (Oxford English Dictionary). Lindsay found that in connecting with various local schools where CRC programming might be provided, arts and music education was met with only passing interest and school-funded support. However, support for literacy was extremely desirable. Pre-Texts opens the door to arts education, on the *pretext* of reading improvement. Academic development and literacy have been so severely severed from the arts, that the idea that the arts are a vehicle for learning how to read is met with skepticism.

“Make up your mind,” some potential partners demand. “Is Pre-Texts a literacy program? Or is it arts education? Or maybe civic development?” The answer is yes to all the options because each depends on the others. (Sommer 2014, p. 111)

How easy it is to forget, in the current educational climate that the list of arts disciplines includes the literary arts (Barton & Ewing, 2017). Sympathetic educational goals are competing for time and space in the curriculum. For literacy to be understood only as “literal comprehension, spelling, punctuation, grammar and on-demand writing for a specific purpose... contradicts the body of scholarly research and writing that defines literacies in an increasingly multimodal world as an ‘open-textured’ concept” (ibid., p. 222). The UNESCO definition of literacy in 2004 stated that “there are many practices of literacy embedded in different cultural processes, personal circumstances and collective structures” (UNESCO, 2004, p. 6). In an increasingly globalized society, literacy must include navigating modes of communication across cultural boundaries and having the skills to select and adapt interpretation skills to the context, or as Peter Freebody phrases it, “literacy refers to the orchestration in action of resources relating to the peculiarities of the demands at hand” (2007, p. 9). It can no longer just be considered a narrow set of competencies demonstrated in a high-stakes test. Pre-Texts supports the target reading and literacy competencies that all elementary schools must aim for, while also integrating high-level oracy, inference, creativity, and interpersonal skills.

Freebody’s metaphor of literacy as an “open-textured” concept, as cited in Barton and Ewing, is particularly pertinent to the Pre-Texts approach. A text, after all, means a weave (textile) whose threads can loosen and tie up in various ways.

Counter-Melodies and Creativity

If it's been woven, it can be untied, pulled apart and reassembled. During the Pre-Texts process, students “read closely, practice critical distance, and make personal connections to possibly foreign texts and to each other” (Sommer, 2021, p. 75). Freire and Macedo said, “Reading always involves critical perception, interpretation, and rewriting of what is read” (1987, p. 24). While many educational practices in schools foster passivity from students when faced with a text (Freire 2005; Navarrette et al., 2020), Pre-Texts provides a framework in which students become co-creators (and recreators) of meaning alongside the author, all through a remarkably simple set of instructions: read the text aloud, ask questions, and use the text to create art. The following section will look at each of these processes and their component parts in turn.

DEVELOPMENT

The Reader

Recycled magazines, newspapers, and colored paper litter the tables. As soon as the students arrive at school they know that they will be starting a new story - a new journey. One girl brings a beaten-up plastic bag filled with beads, old stickers, and glue sticks to share with the class. All of these things and more will be used to create book covers, or “cartoneras,” for the new story.

Students take 3 minutes to gather materials they'd like to use and then settle into their seats. A printed copy of “All Summer in a Day” is handed to the first student to start reading aloud. They stand tall and proud on their chair, reading to their classmates, who are all hard at work cutting and coloring, translating what they are hearing into a visual representation. After a paragraph, the first reader passes the text to the next student. Some read just a sentence, others half a page, and around the classroom goes Ray Bradbury's story.

Eventually, each student having read, they get to the end of the story. Someone asks for five more minutes to finish their creation and a few others agree. Several students have finished already and go to hang their cartoneras on the clothesline to be displayed for everyone to see and return to the tables to start cleaning up the supplies, organizing items into set bins.

In *Becoming a Nation of Readers*, the report of the US Commission on Reading concluded that “The single most important activity for building the knowledge required for eventual success in reading is reading aloud to children” (Andresen et. al., 1984, p. 23). Reading aloud is a cornerstone practice in Pre-Texts. Like many of the

Box 1. Activity Summary: The Reader

Summary

- A text about 1 page in length is read aloud. The text could be up to two pages if the students are more familiar with it.
- A reader is selected from the group. This might be the teacher, a student, or a collaborative reading between multiple students.
- Students draw while listening, or work on their book covers.

Do

- Encourage doodling or crafting while the text is being read. Doodling has been shown to increase concentration while listening to information (Andrade, 2009; Sunni Brown 2020).

Don't

- Require students to listen for specific details. Students are allowed to let their minds wander while they listen.

Pre-Texts constituent practices, the inspiration comes from Latin American literary traditions. Reading aloud while the hands are engaged in quiet activity mirrors the tradition of *los lectores*: the readers in tobacco factories. Readings would include the daily news, followed by literary works of all varieties, voted on by the workers. The readers themselves were paid by the workers and elected through a competitive process (Rivera et. al., 2007). The influence of the reader has been the subject of several studies on the emergence of trade unions among tobacco factory workers. Samuel Gompers, a British-American trade union leader “fondly remembered his stint as a cigarmaker in New York... ‘The reading [in Yiddish] was always followed by discussion . . . the fellowship that grew between congenial shopmates was something that lasted a lifetime’” (Mormino, 1998, p. 3).

It has long been known that reading aloud to preschool children has a multitude of benefits (Massaro, 2017), which include fostering “emergent literacy;” the tools required for reading and writing later in life (Duursma et. al., 2008). However, the practice “often stops, or is greatly cut back, once a child learns to read on [their] own” (Guignon, 2016). Reading aloud to students continues to support imagination and observation skills, improve critical thinking, build community through shared experience and helps students engage with the rhythm of language (National Library of New Zealand). Joseph Sanacore states that “reading aloud is an important motivational strategy not only for primary school children but also for upper-elementary, middle, and high school students” (1992, p. 1). Sanacore also notes that limited class time and curriculum requirements can make taking the time to read aloud difficult. Reading aloud as part of Pre-Texts could allow teachers to find an “instructional balance that considers both a sensitivity to curricular mandates and a perspective that reading aloud is beneficial to students” (ibid).

Counter-Melodies and Creativity

Allowing students to doodle while listening also takes from the tradition of the tobacco factory readers. Doodling has often been associated with a lack of concentration or interest. However, the opposite is now believed to be true. Jackie Andrade's important 2009 study found that those who doodled while listening to a 2.5-minute voicemail message retained 29% more information than a control group (Andrade, 2009). Sunni Brown is someone who coaches adults in doodling because of how it increases (cognitive) power, performance, and pleasure:

A doodler is connecting neurological pathways with previously disconnected pathways. A doodler is concentrating intently, sifting through information, conscious and otherwise, and -much more often than we realize - generating massive insights... I hope that you seriously elevate your skill in doodling: because you'll be elevating your skill in thinking and problem-solving, too. (Brown, 2020, p. 11)

It is also wise when inviting students into this activity to refer to this process as “doodling” rather than “drawing.” Drawing can be an intimidating term. While most young children are happy to draw with abandon, as we get older we are more likely to avoid it if we think we are uncreative. The term “doodling” is accessible to anyone (ibid., p. 8). Moreover, during the doodling time, students can develop their own strategies and style for what Sunni called the “spontaneous marks which help us think” (ibid. p. 11). These strategies can serve them throughout their educational career. A Canadian Medical Association Journal article showed how 30 minutes of doodling based on dense medical learning can reduce stress, improve content memory, and support students' abilities to draw together different concepts (Courneya, 2012). In addition to Sunni Brown, Mike Rohde and Oliver West are firm believers in visual notetaking, particularly for students with dyslexia and visual thinkers (Rohde n.d.; West, 2008).

The other practice contained in the above scene is that of the “cartonera” - repurposing cardboard to create book covers. This takes inspiration from Eloísa Cartonera in Buenos Aires, Argentina and Sarita Cartonera in Lima, Peru - publishing collectives which came out of economic crises. The book covers collect all a student's explorations on a given text. The purpose is two-fold: it gives a focused, arts-based activity which can continue over a number of reading sessions, in which students must translate what they are hearing into a visual format. Secondly, by creating their own books in the process of reading a book, students dismantle the authority of printed works. Books are collections and repositories of ideas, which students are also capable of creating. Cartoneras range from complex collages created from National Geographic and Smithsonian magazines to creative depictions of phrases, mixed with artistic representations of the characters that are beginning to take shape

the students' minds. During this process, it is so important to allow the students full creative rights over the text. Therefore, when distributing the text for students to consult, use a text-only version (no images). Encourage students to focus on what they are hearing and what they are creating, rather than recreating the book cover or image found in the book.

The Clothesline

Our second reading of the story is always interesting. A student volunteers to read the whole text, an unsuspecting custodian is roped into a dramatic reading, or an older sibling who uses the Friday mornings to get caught up on homework in the school building during program will take a break and read aloud to the class.

While our (sometimes unsuspecting) reader reads "All Summer in a Day" everyone has a sheet of paper to write down a question they have about anything in the story - a question to ask the text. It is quiet as everyone is listening intently to the story unfold. The tables are clear of craft materials, but a few students sketch as they listen.

Once the story is complete everyone places their questions on the clothesline for everyone to read. Three minutes, then five minutes, go by, as each question is considered. Realizing there are no stupid questions and that everyone has a unique perspective on the story, eventually students start picking one question to take back with them to the table where they start writing out an answer or a guess as to what the answer could be.

Excited to share, the kids gather around the stage in the "cafetorium," a multi-use space used for school musicals as well as the lunch-time gathering spot. Almost every student is raising their hand to be picked to go first.

"Remember class, you are Creative Roots members! Find a way to pick who goes first fairly." The jumbo dice someone made from folded-up paper is rolled, whoever was the closest to "five" goes first today. Daniela stands on stage.

"I chose the question "What year did they travel to Venus?" and I think it is around the 1950s because that is when rockets were invented! I think."

As the kids then start sharing what facts they know about NASA and space travel, I start to get a picture of where class will go today. No lesson plans are needed with Pre-Texts as we have all the materials we need to get kids practicing skim reading, research skills, and engaging with their classmates. A massive stack of donated National Geographic magazines, the school library, and a shared classroom tablet is all we need.

There are three Pre-Texts activities happening within this scene. Reading aloud, asking questions of the text, and going off on a tangent. The latter of these involve introducing a unique tool into the classroom: a clothesline.

Ask Questions of the Text

In Pre-Texts, teachers don't interrogate students. Students interrogate the text. This subtle but significant shift makes the ability to question a shared right. Students learn that their questions are valid and valuable - not because the teacher says so, but because those questions become the creative impulse behind their peers' investigations. Questions are each written on a piece of paper. If students have been doodling while listening to the text (which is strongly encouraged) the question is written on the same page. This is then "published" on the clothesline. For students in Lindsay's classes, the clothesline has become just a normal feature. Once everyone (the teacher included) has published a question, students peruse the work of their peers. This is an important part of the hidden civics curriculum embedded in the Pre-Texts method. By every student asking a question, the diversity of thought in the classroom is put on display. Divergence becomes a source of admiration and enjoyment. Admiration and enjoyment of difference are after all, the basis of strong democracy (Schiller, 1794). Once time has been given for perusal, each student adopts a question and takes it back to their seat to write a response. The point here isn't to generate a correct answer but to imagine, speculate, invent, and infer. If students are overwhelmed by the writing possibilities, teachers can direct them towards an informative or imaginative response.

Box 2. Activity Summary: Ask Questions of the Text

Summary

- Everyone (including the teacher) writes down a question based on the text they just heard (now referred to as "the grounding text").
- Questions are hung up on a clothesline.
- Each person adopts a question and writes a response to it.
- Answers are published on the clothesline.
- *Optional*: students read their responses aloud or summarize the question and what they have been writing about. Whoever provided the original question goes next to share their reflection. In this way, everyone in the group will share orally.

Do

- Encourage open-ended questions (you may need to explain the difference between open and closed questions. Open questions leave room for speculation and have multiple correct answers. Closed questions have right or wrong answers, and while they provide opportunities for inference, they provide fewer opportunities to use this time to be creative).

Don't

- Try and correct incorrect answers. There will be plenty of time to "correct" facts as students continue through the text. Incorrect answers are opportunities for reflection later.

Asking a question of the text provides a wonderful opportunity for students to practice inference. The US Department of Education Reading Framework mentions students' abilities to make inferences no less than 26 times (2019). Students often consult the text, unprompted, in the process of asking and answering questions. As Doris Sommer often reminds facilitators, "we don't impose a text, but generate the desire for it" (Cultural Agents, *Manual for Facilitators*).

Working with young students, oftentimes the questions are straightforward. In reading Michael Morpurgo's *The Mozart Question* during our hybrid summer programming, the questions initially were "Who was Mozart?" "What is the Mozart Question," and "Where is Venice?" It can be frustrating when the gamut of possible inquiries is reduced to simple questions with simple answers. Yet in another session on the same text, students asked questions such as "What was the Holocaust?", "Why didn't they like the Jews?", and "Why didn't anyone stop the Nazis from being mean to people?" One student came back the following Friday having done an impressive amount of research, which they then shared with the class with support and additional information from Lindsay and Sophie. It is in these moments that, as educators, we realize the power but also the complexity of allowing students free rein over inquiry. This process can be extremely intimidating to educators, who have been taught to start with the knowledge that must be learned and work backwards. Handing over the ability to ask wide-reaching questions means that we cannot control where the conversation goes, or our own comfort levels. It also means surrendering the image of a knowledge holder, which can be quite scary in a room full of 9-11-year-olds.

Don't be afraid to tell students you don't know the answer. Empower students to go find out (head to the library or jump on the internet) and then ask them to report back to the class. There is nothing more thrilling than having a student leave class with a question and seeing what they return with the following class period.

Go Off on a Tangent

Tangents, in a similar vein, encourage students to read and research widely outside of the class, guided by their own interests. For a tangent activity, students must find a piece of text from a new source and bring it to the class for discussion and exploration. The tangent could be a magazine piece, an internet article, an excerpt from another book, a poem, a Wikipedia entry... any text-based resource. An excellent prompt for this age group is "Look for a text that has something to do with the one we're reading and that has a difficult word" (Cultural Agents, *Manual for Facilitators*).

The tangents students find become the starting activity of the next session. As students enter the space, they hang their tangents up on the clothesline. The group

Counter-Melodies and Creativity

Box 3. Activity Summary: Going off on a Tangent

Summary

- Students find a text which connects to the grounding text (the text read aloud together).
- Those texts are published on the clothesline. This can be a great way to begin any session other than the first.
- Students peruse the tangents brought in by their peers, choosing one to read closely.
- Each student summarizes their chosen tangent to the class, offering a brief reflection on it.
- Whoever submitted that tangent is next to speak. They explain why they chose that text and what connection they made between it and the grounding text. They then repeat the above step with whichever of their peers' tangents they selected from the clothesline.
- In this process, students are learning to create connections between texts, learning read widely and explain their inter-textual connections. They are also introduced to a wide range of literature brought in by their peers.

Do

- Encourage students to bring in texts from a wide range of sources.
- Make provision for students who don't have books or internet access at home. This activity can take place in the school library, or with a given collection of resources.

Don't

- Direct what connections need to be made. If the connection is tenuous, students will engage their creativity to explain and justify it to the class.

Variation

- Instead of going off on a tangent, students can "go off on a leaf." This means that they find a passage from within the same book as the core text. The same process follows, where the leaves are submitted to a clothesline. Instead of asking how the text is connected, students may speculate on what is happening in the passage they chose from the clothesline and what has happened in the intervening pages.
- Tangents and leaves can become a new grounding text for future Pre-Texts sessions.

is given time to briefly read each of them, before selecting or "adopting" one to read in depth. Once again, the role of the teacher is changed from "knowledge holder" to a kind of "facilitator-in-chief." So often, students must try to become interested in a text simply because it is the assigned reading. This activity uncovers students' intrinsic motivation by encouraging them to create their own connections to the grounding text. It shows that they too have experience and knowledge which is valuable in the learning space.

The tangents activity gamifies reading and research. Making intertextual connections is one of the advanced skills of literacy, but that does not mean that it can't be fun, potentially even hilarious.

Use This Text to Create Art

It's one of those rare warm early spring days and the students are restless being kept indoors - on a Friday no less! Unfortunately, our music portion of the day must remain indoors - it's too risky to take loaned violins outside. The Pre-Texts portion of the day, however, now that is always flexible! I start thinking about how we can

still interact with the text on some level while encouraging more play and a way to get the wiggles out. Why don't we play charades? During a bathroom and snack break, I pull out some 3x5 cards and jot down two different scenes from our story. I include a list of characters and a page number for reference. I split the class into two teams and give each team a scene to act out from the story. The other team will have copies of the story to practice skim reading to identify what page and paragraph is being acted out.

After explaining the guidelines to the class, they quickly jump into action, one group securing the pine tree on one end of the playground and the other gathering around the flagpole in a top-secret huddle. They are given 5 minutes to decide who will be what character and to rehearse their silent play. Round after round is played, with everyone taking turns to be the facilitator and picking scenes to act out. 45 minutes fly by while enjoying time in the sun. As we settle down into a reflection circle after the last game, I start to realize how wonderful it is to hand the reins over to eager young minds to explore on their own.

Here we enter the “interpret through the arts” portion of Pre-Texts. Charades is just one example of an arts-based activity in which students to translate written text into another modality. The students creating the silent show must read the text closely. The guessing team are re-reading the text, translating visual and kinesthetic cues back into written words, all the while becoming intimately familiar with the text through play. In this example, students are in teams. This activity can also be done individually, in which case everyone in the group is skimming the text to try and identify which sentence or paragraph is being acted out. In this case, whoever guesses correctly goes next. Charades works for a number of “locate and recall” activities. Students must find and write down as many animals as possible which the character meets in the book - each animal becomes a prompt in the guessing game. Students locate as many characters as possible and write down their names and 3 facts about them - these are placed in a hat and drawn out as guessing game prompts.

This is also the most flexible part of the process. The arts-based activity can be suggested by the facilitator or from a participant, and then shaped by the group. We have found that working with younger students, it is helpful to give more direction rather than less. However, eventually even young students feel confident in devising activities, knowing that suggestions don't need to arrive as fully formed ideas. They can be tested, shaped, and improved by the group. Here again is the hidden civics curriculum. Each person in the group has the capacity and potential to lead.

In our Pre-Texts facilitator training, a participant suggested we take the “interpretive” idea literally. Each participant in the multinational group translated a portion of the text into their own language. The group brought forward translations in Persian, Hindi, Bengali, French, Spanish, Swahili, American Sign Language,

Counter-Melodies and Creativity

Marathi, Telugu, Welsh, Amharigna and Korean. Each person read out their translated sentence while the rest of the group read the text in a completely new way to find the translated sentence, searching for syntactical clues or matching the tone of voice to portions of the text. Again, whoever placed the translated section correctly would go next. This process created so much admiration for diversity and difference in the group and an experience the participants are unlikely to forget.

Creating new activities looks like this: somebody proposes an idea or source of inspiration. Let's say a student says, "This is boring, I'd rather read about superheroes!" We learn that Abi is very interested in drawing superheroes. The facilitator asks, "How about tomorrow, we turn all the characters into superheroes? Maybe Abi can teach us a little about how to draw them." Abi makes a list of things that a superhero needs, and other students add anything that's been forgotten. In the next session, students are put in groups of two or three with a large piece of paper. They scan the text for a character they could turn into a superhero. Abi leads them through the list she made. "What would your character's superpower be? Who would their nemesis be? What would their superhero outfit be? What is their superhero name?" Abi is transformed from a disruptor to a facilitator. She takes responsibility and brings her expertise to the table. Meanwhile, the students are critically reading the text for character information, recreating the work of the author on their own terms.

As children in CRC are also learning violin for a portion of their Fridays, music-integrated activities work particularly well. The soundtrack activity is always a big hit. The facilitator curates a playlist of about 5 pieces and plays excerpts to the class. While the music is playing, students skim-read the text and connect what they are hearing to a particular sentence or paragraph. They can mark or annotate their copy of the text with "Excerpt 1," write out the chosen sentence for handwriting practice, or simply share orally which sentence or paragraph they chose and why. What was it in the music that made you choose that section? What was it in the text that connected it to that mood or feeling? In U.S. Department of Education terms, students here are making complex inferences about mood and tone. Perhaps most impressively, in justifying their decisions, students are engaging in "the processing demands of analysis and evaluation by stating, explaining, and justifying," a cognitive target for advanced eighth-grade readers (National Assessment Governing Board, 2019, p. 67). They are also learning to explain their own feeling, response, or impulse, which is foundational for socio-emotional learning.

In our study of the book *Kensuke's Kingdom* during Middle School Summer Camp 2022, we found that a number of activities relating to travel worked extremely well. In the story, Michael and his family sail around the world with their dog, Stella, before he is lost at sea, finding himself on an island with the mysterious Kensuke. This tale of travel provided a wealth of opportunities for students to investigate new countries.

Figure 1. Students' ship's logs and vacation posters created based on Michael Morpurgo's *Kensuke's Kingdom* and displayed on a clothesline

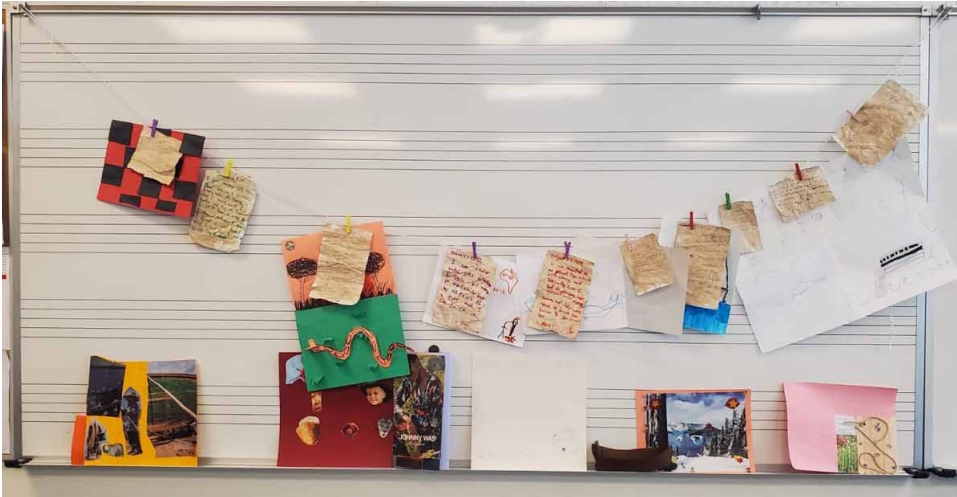
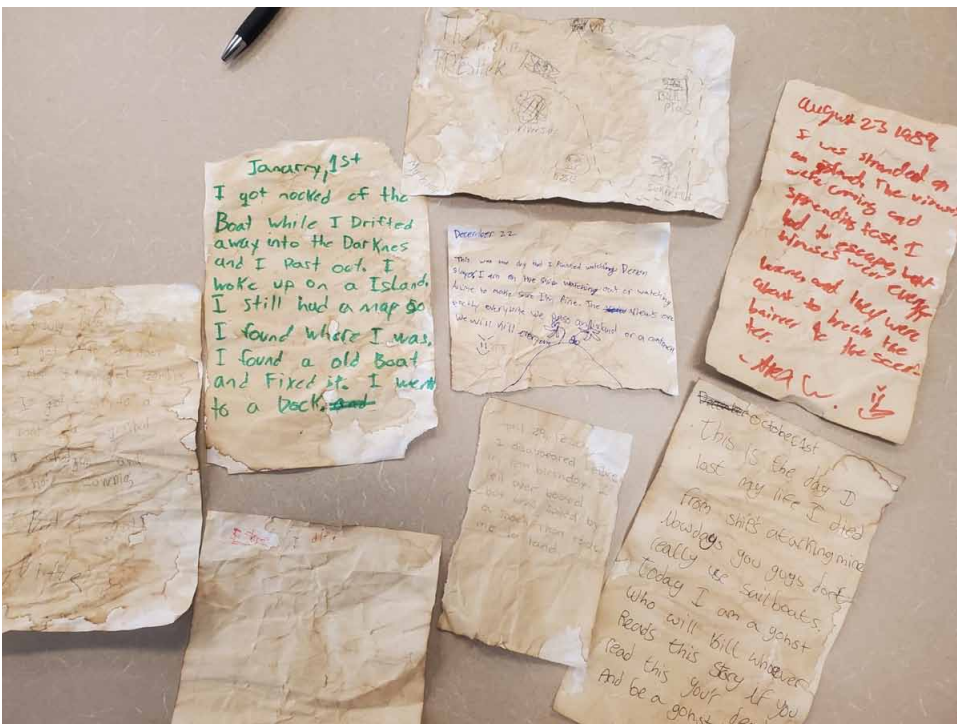


Figure 2. Ship's logs written by CRC students



Counter-Melodies and Creativity

Box 4. Activity summary: Creating Arts-Based Activities

Summary

- A member of the group brings forward an idea or source of inspiration.
- The group inputs ideas on how to make this into an activity.
- Set time limits and provide parameters.
- Always end with “what did we do?”

Do

- Be flexible! While it is often a good idea with elementary students for the adult to have some arts-based activities planned, be receptive to interests in the group and look for ways to turn those into group activities.
- When the activity is brought by the lead facilitator, look for ways to co-create the activity with participants. Can they inform the size of the groups, or the time given for making their creations, or choose a mode of delivery? What creative disruption can they bring to the idea you came to the session with?

Don't

- Be intimidated by a lack of expertise in an art form! This is where participants can shine.

Ideas for arts-based activities

- Blackout poetry: Using the printed text, students will create their own poem by crossing out and destroying the existing text to leave only words and images that they want to use in their own creation. Poems will be placed on the clothesline, and using the tangent sequence, students will reflect on and observe the other poems.
- Character portraits: Students sit back-to-back. One reads a description of a character from the text. The other draws the character. Then the partners swap over and repeat the exercise with a different character. This exercise shows how we add our own information and interpretations to texts. Notice how multiple people who were drawing the same character have different images.
- News Broadcast: have students work in small groups to report on an event which happened in the book, as though they are telling the world on the evening news.
- Take the first sentence of the book (or choose another sentence entirely) and use this as the start of your own story. E.g., The first line in Kensuke's Kingdom is “I disappeared on the night before my twelfth birthday.” Students use this as a prompt for their own stories.
- Pass it on: Provide each student with a stack of small paper. There should be the same number of papers in the pile as participants in the game. Have each student take a phrase or sentence from the text and write it on the top sheet. Everyone passes the whole pile to the left. Each person now draws what is written on the next sheet. The next person writes what they see. Pass to the left and draw what is written. This continues until all the papers have been written or drawn on. Everyone should get their original pile back. Lots of laughs usually ensue as people look through how the message got lost in translation!
- Give yourself and your students permission to be imaginative! You will be amazed at the creative potential of your students and of yourself!

They worked in teams to create a poster for each of the countries Michael writes about in his ship's log, using information from the text and from their own research (Figure 1), and then wrote their own ship's logs from Michael's perspective. It's safe to say that Lindsay and I had not fully appreciated the creativity that this would bring out in the students. Their logs included everything from Michael becoming a ghost and haunting people because they don't use sailboats anymore; Michael being saved by a shark rather than Kensuke; Michael having a map with him when thrown overboard, being able to fix a boat and getting himself to the nearest port; and Michael arriving safely on Kensuke's Island only to realize that there is a killer virus and it's coming for everyone... (Figure 2).

In another activity, students created postcards using information from the text and wrote messages from one character to another. Postcards written from the dog's perspective to the grandmother at home, or from Michael to his best friend, all represent higher-order thinking, analysis, and inference. The humble postcard activity engages students in critical analysis of character perspectives, creative writing, and visual art all in one go.

Once students have been through the rhythm of Pre-Texts once or twice, they are able to orchestrate the process. Creative Roots students arrive on a Friday knowing that it is time to learn violin. Then after their violin lessons, they know they will be working with a text, beginning with reading aloud. They get the materials ready for drawing and they work out who will read first. It is an ensemble cast; Miss Lindsay is simply a slightly taller and more experienced reader. Seeing a creative impulse from a student become a whole class activity through which students learn, make art, and reflect, is truly thrilling.

The key to success in implementing arts-based activities is to give students space to facilitate, propose suggestions for the activities, and invent entirely new activity suggestions. The collaborative nature increases buy-in, particularly for activities which might involve them looking silly! The other key is to have plenty of “guard rails” in place to keep the activity moving along, especially if you are working with younger students still developing their executive functioning skills. Some stand-out activities that have worked well with CRC students from the list in box 4 have been Blackout Poetry, Character Portraits, Postcard writing, and creating their cartonera book covers. These are also some of the first activities introduced to the class, so the students can take ownership of them quickly - they are easy to understand which creates opportunities to reimagine them as a class.

RECAPITULATION

What Did We Do?

A cornerstone of the Pre-Texts protocol is group reflection, prompted by the question “What did we do?” This reflection process is important. As John Dewey says, “We do not learn from experience. We learn from reflecting on experience” (1910). We do not ask “What did we learn,” which can be interpreted as a cue for validation of the teacher. It's also much harder to respond to the first question with “nothing.” This question works best in a circle, where everyone can see each other. Each participant shares a reflection, one or two sentences are sufficient, and then nominates the next person to speak. When the nomination process is initially introduced to a group, it

Counter-Melodies and Creativity

can be awkward and strange. After a few sessions, though, it runs like clockwork. Students are allowed to pass, as this takes the pressure off, but they still participate but signaling who will speak next. As with the clothesline, this process of inviting peers to speak has become completely normal in Creative Roots classes. It requires students to notice who has spoken and who has not. It requires that we don't speak without also making space. It means that students are vouching for one another's participation. Students are allowed to call on the teacher, who is also in the reflection circle, meaning that calling on someone to speak is no longer a signifier of power but of civility.

This structure goes against the grain of conventional teaching wisdom, where lessons must begin with defined objectives, and the lessons end with measuring the class performance against these objectives. The "What did we do?" process allows students to decide what they take from the session. One student may reflect that they engaged in complex vocabulary or learned precisely what the curriculum demands. Another student may say that they worked well as a team when creating their charade. Another might state that the class listened to classical music, and this made them feel calm. Teachers cannot be all things to all students, though they are very often expected to be. This process puts the power back into students' hands to decide what it is they have learned and what they needed that day. They are allowed to have agency over what was important enough to reflect upon. No need for individualized learning plans and child-specific targets. Let's face it teachers, you have quite enough on your plate without those.

CONCLUSION

Here we would like to encourage you to re-read the first vignette of the exposition section. It is the voice of the youngest and quietest student who, instead of accepting the cruelty and bullying in the story, decides that the text can and should take a new direction. One student's impulse to create a new character who changes the direction of the story spirals into an activity in which each student exercises agency over the written word. Creative Roots students are not passive when faced with a text. They are not even simply empathetic readers. They are activist readers.

Something which exemplifies the impact of ongoing engagement in the Pre-Texts protocol for me (Sophie) is this: Our plans for a 5-day summer camp for rising 5th graders at their new home, Riverside Middle School, were cut short when I got Covid, leaving Lindsay as the sole facilitator of the camp. Lindsay broke it to the students on Wednesday that this would have to be the last day of camp because Miss Sophie wasn't well.

“No! Miss Lindsay, please can we have more camp!”

“Sorry students, it’s very hard with only one teacher.”

“But we are all teachers!”

“I can do a lesson on drawing manga - I’m really good at it.”

“I can be the reader - I read ahead in the book last night so I know all the hard words that are coming up.”

“Miss Lindsay, I’m really good at paper airplanes. I could teach everyone how and we can see whose goes the furthest.”

This is the transformation that we see in young students who are allowed to be facilitators; allowed to be active when things happen to them or to characters in a

Figure 3. Students run a drawing class



Counter-Melodies and Creativity

text. Remember that CRC students are selected based on low literacy or English comprehension. They are students that lacked the confidence to speak up in class. These are the same students taking a one-hour lesson on a summer's Thursday morning, directing their peers on the techniques of drawing anime (Figure 3).

We don't want to lead you to think that Creative Roots classes take place in some pedagogical utopia, although at times it does feel that way. We deal with student meltdowns, reluctance to participate, racial tensions, and even contrasting political views among 9-year-olds! But we have found that Pre-Texts fosters an environment which builds the socio-emotional skills required to navigate these (sometimes deeply personal) challenges. We can rise above whatever comes each program day and learn from the experiences. We know that the unique position of Creative Roots means that our obstacles are different from those in a full-time teacher's classroom, but we encourage you to see how a creative approach might change not only your perspective but your students' perception of what it means to be a creative academic.

There are elements of being a teacher which will always involve a battle of some kind. But we have found that there are plenty of elements of a teacher's practice which are made into a battle when they don't need to be. We do not have to battle to get students interested in a text if we allow them to find what interests them about it. We are not fighting with students to get them to read - they read so that they don't miss out on whatever game might come next. We are not fighting against the inherent joy and pleasure of learning but harnessing it.

When teaching about creativity and improvisation, harpist Deborah Henson-Conant talks about structure as the string suspended in the sugar water. If you suspend a piece of string in a supersaturated solution, over time it will crystals will begin to form - at first small, but growing all the time until the string is covered in crystals. Those crystals will likely form anyway, in disparate places around the glass, but the string speeds up the process. It gives something for the sugar to crystallize around so that they form a coherent whole. Classrooms are like supersaturated solutions of creative, civic, and academic potential. The magic moments of learning will always happen, but Pre-Texts gives a structure around which those moments can crystallize. It draws those experiences into a coherent shape around which creative potential can grow into something really rather special.

CODA

What Will You Do?

More information about Pre-Texts, including free facilitator training sessions, can be found at pre-texts.org. The authors would also be very happy to hear from you if you are considering implementing Pre-Texts at your school. This protocol can be used in classrooms, tutoring groups, after-school and summer classes, libraries, language programs, and among university students! Anywhere there is a text, there is a pretext, and an opportunity to use Pre-Texts. We leave you with Professor Doris Sommer's reminder that "Pre- Texts is an approach, not a detailed recipe. Years ago, Freire warned us against prepackaged pedagogies that urge innovation and deliver exhaustive instructions" (2014). Our presentation of Pre-Texts is not a step-by-step guide, but a grounded-in-reality reflection of our experience with this approach to teaching. Pre-Texts is a theme on which to improvise in your own context, with your own students, and the melodies will be different in each case. A structure, lead sheet, and chorus are before you. Press play and have fun.

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KEY TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

Cultural Agents: an initiative at Harvard University and a not-for-profit organization which facilitates Pre-Texts training worldwide.

Doodling: drawing while engaged in another task. Sunni Brown discusses issues with the etymology of the term and provides the revised definition that doodling is “making spontaneous marks (with your mind and body) to help yourself think” (Brown, 2020, p. 11).

Literacy: a multi-modal set of competencies and social practices by which we make sense of the world, including but not limited to written texts.

Pre-Texts: a curation of practices which provide a framework for integrating reading, creativity and civics through arts-based activities.

Tangents: Pieces of texts which participants find independently and connect to the central text.

The Clothesline: a literal clothesline or piece of string suspended in the classroom or gathering space on which participants in the Pre-Texts protocol can “publish” their work. The practice derives from the practice of *literatura de cordel* in South America.

ENDNOTE

¹ The 4-day school week is not uncommon in Colorado. One hundred and twenty-four school districts, constituting 69% of the 178 school districts in Colorado operate a 4-day week. In these districts, the school days are longer to make up for the 5th day, as state law requires that students receive 1080 scheduled hours of schooling. Many of the 4-day school districts are in particularly rural

Counter-Melodies and Creativity

communities, where students have greater distances to travel to school, but also for things like dentist appointments and athletics. The 4-day versus 5-day week is a hotly debated topic in the state. More information can be found on the Colorado Department of Education website.

APPENDIX: ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- ArtsEd search is a hub for research on the benefits of the arts in education from across the USA: <https://www.artsedsearch.org/>
- The Arts Literacy Project: <http://www.artslit.org/>
- Eric Booth, (2023). *Making Change: Teaching artists and their role in shaping a better world*. ITAC. The International Teaching Artists Collaborative website also has a significant repository of research and resources: <https://www.itac-collaborative.com/useful-research>
- Sunni Brown, (2020). *The Doodle Revolution*. Penguin.
- Jose Falconi and Doris Sommer (2023). *Pre-Texts International*. Harvard UP.
- Mike Rohde, “Sketchnoting” Method: <https://rohdesign.com/sketchnotes>
- Oliver West, Footnotes Visual Multi-Layered Thinking: <https://footnotesvmt.com/> and his book, *In Search of Words*.
- The Pre-Texts website, with examples and inspiration from around the world: <https://pre-texts.org/>. You can also sign up to the Harvard Cultural Agents Initiative newsletter, as Cultural Agents supports the delivery of Pre-Texts worldwide: <https://culturalagents.org/>