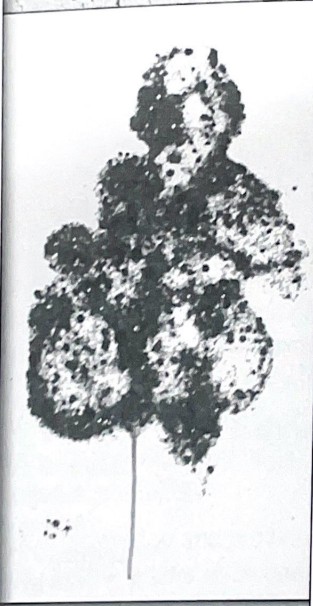


"Draw a tree and see what happens!"

A Collaborative and Arts-Informed Exploration of Emergent Curriculum



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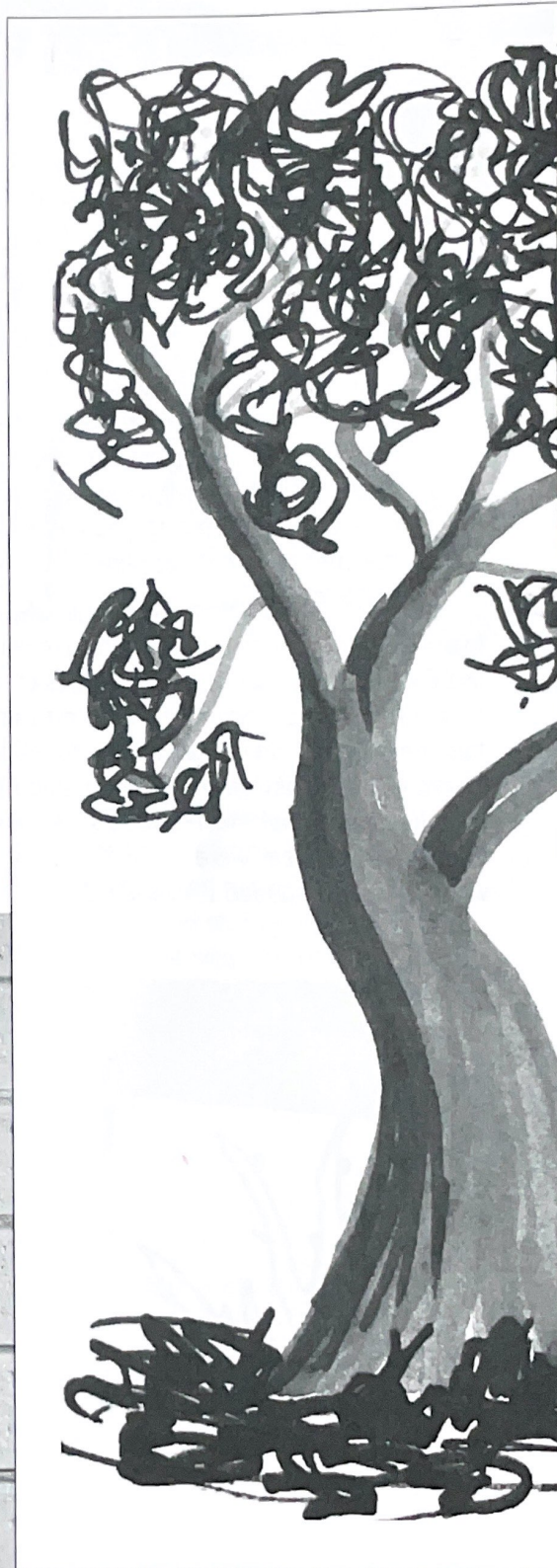
Combining our experiences as visual art and music educators, we recently conceptualized and implemented a participatory art initiative as part of an arts-informed research project on teacher knowledge and experience at the Faculty of Education of Queen's University. Arts-informed research, as described by Knowles and Cole (2008), uses the arts in conjunction with traditional literature reviews and qualitative methods to more fully illuminate inquiry. As researcher-artists, we had collaboratively created visual and music art pieces to interpret and respond to a narrative told by an experienced teacher (Kukkonen & Bolden, forthcoming).

Through this process of creation, we developed personal understandings of the story that were reflected in our pieces. We then designed the participatory art event described in this article as a way to further re-present the narrative data in a visual way and to explore and extend understandings of the overarching theme, emergent curriculum, while simultaneously engaging members of the education community in the project.

John Dewey argued that curriculum should be "drawn out" from the students, instead of "poured in," meaning that educational content should *emerge* from the students' activities and

interests as opposed to government mandates (Dewey, 1900/1990). As we see it, this involves creating a classroom “space of emergence” (Osberg & Biesta, 2008, p. 324) where differences are valued and opportunities are created to encounter the unexpected. A prominent example of emergent curriculum is the Reggio Emilia approach to early childhood education, where “children are the protagonists of their own learning and their teachers are considered co-learners and collaborators” (Yusuf, 2010, para. 3). For us, emergent curriculum is where the magic happens in a classroom; it is the moment when a child makes a new discovery and realizes the possibilities of her ideas. We agree with the idea that “learning is a complex phenomenon” (Davis, Sumara, & Kieren, 1996, p. 153) that cannot be controlled and reduced to linear approaches to instruction, as is often the case in K-12 classrooms. Understanding the possibilities of emergent curriculum through teacher accounts can be a first step toward creating educational contexts that allow for this kind of learning beyond the early childhood classroom.

Inspired by a particular teacher's narrative of emergent curriculum, we crafted a drawing activity that encouraged the faculty community to contribute to a collective visualization of a familiar concept, “tree.” Drawing on Osberg & Biesta's (2008) notion that emergence is doubled, with “a responsibility to promote a particular way of being, [as well] as a responsibility to the singularity and uniqueness of each individual”(p. 313) our project explored the emergence of what was shared in common while showcasing the uniqueness that each individual brings to the whole. We present here a description of the participatory work (how it was inspired by the teacher narrative and the process involved in its creation), the significance of individual trees as a metaphor for emergent curriculum, and how the participants' drawing contributions deepened our understanding of this theme.



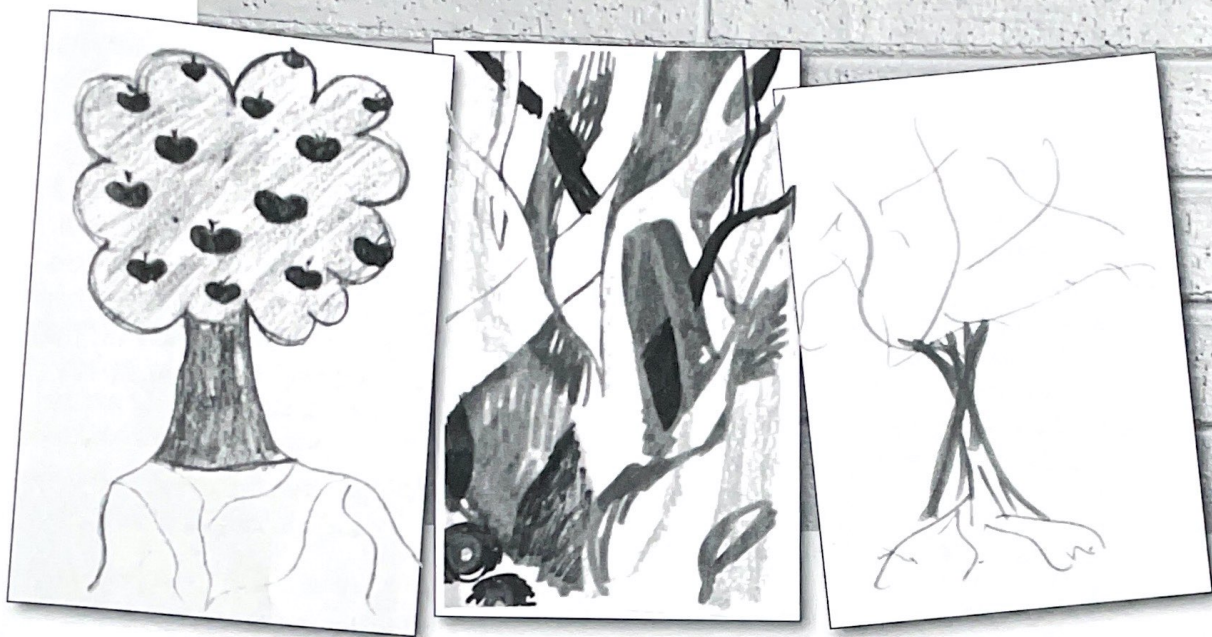
The Project

The title and theme of the art initiative, *Draw a Tree and See What Happens*, references a story told by Betty, a research informant who taught primary school in rural Kent, England from 1956 to 1984. In describing her early teaching experiences—during a time when progressive education practices were in vogue and curriculum guidelines were often nonexistent—she recalled the enjoyment she experienced seeing what individual children brought to the learning context through open-ended activities, such as drawing trees:

I would enjoy watching what they did. Some of their drawings were so lovely...I noticed that, when they drew trees, all their different trees were different. Sometimes you'd get a trunk, and a great round thing that was the top of the tree, and sometimes they would stick out like hands, but they were all so very different. So if you asked every child to draw a tree, you'd have a very interesting arrangement. That was a very fascinating thing. Ask them to draw a tree and see what happens!

Curious to see what would happen if a similar activity were conducted within our own professional learning environment (i.e., Queen's University), we invited anyone and everyone passing through the Faculty of Education to draw trees on index cards, in any way they saw fit (with the markers and crayons we provided, or with their own materials). We then posted the small tree drawings together on the wall opposite the education library, in the shape of a large tree. Over a number of weeks we left index cards, drawing materials, and a "drop box" on a table in this high-traffic area of the building so that individuals could draw at their leisure and not feel pressured by our presence. Whenever new trees were left in the drop box, we added them to the collective tree assembled on the wall. In total we added 250 individual drawings to the collective tree.





Diversity Within Constraint

We chose the tree form to present the contributions as a way to draw people into the activity, giving them something tangible to contribute to. Our purpose was to learn about emergence through the creation of an environment where we could see emergence in action—to ‘see what happened.’ We positioned arbitrarily the drawings as they were contributed, avoiding intentionally placing them in any order based on the style, or technique of individual cards or aesthetic groups, though definitely guided by our notion of the structure of a “tree.” One of the things we noticed was that in curating the individual works, that is, positioning the drawings into a tree form, we were presenting the contributors’ work in a particular way that may have affected responses of future contributors or viewers. We were, to some extent, shaping the emergence. We further realized that emergent curriculum is always constrained in some way; in Betty’s classroom, for example, the students were constrained by the materials they were provided with, the set task of drawing a tree, and the time allotted to do it. Working within these limits, participants were still able to showcase their individuality through the use of different drawing techniques,

materials, and compositions. For instance, some drawings offered realistic renditions of trees, whereas others interpreted the tree form in more abstracted ways. Some drawings used only one medium (e.g., oil pastel), and others used a variety (e.g., marker, crayon, pencil and even glitter). There was a wide range of drawing techniques employed using the same materials (e.g., colouring/shading with pencils vs. simple line drawing), further highlighting that constraints within art activities still allow for diversity.

The Tree Metaphor

Metaphors are often used in education to help us articulate pedagogical philosophies and practices (Connelly & Clandinin, 1988). Inspired by Betty’s story of drawing trees, we were drawn to the metaphor of students as individual trees to further our understanding of holistic and emergent education.

Have you ever taken a walk through a natural park or wooded trail and stopped to admire the unique qualities of the surrounding nature? You might notice that each tree has a

different trunk size, branch formation, and bark design, and that the trees have naturally spaced themselves in seemingly haphazard ways. Now consider the learning context of an early childhood education environment. Looking around the classroom during free play, you might see two children building a castle out of blocks, others pretending to be pizza chefs, or another eagerly filling a paper with splatters of paint. Instantly, a sense of their personalities and interests are evident to even the most passive observer. This scene contrasts with that of many typical elementary or high school classrooms where students are encouraged to stay seated in designated areas and work on the same assignments, and are tested on subject-specific knowledge. This approach to education is problematic given that students benefit greatly from natural learning environments that allow them to explore their interests, make connections between different learning areas, collaborate with their peers, and build meaningful relationships with everything in their surroundings (Brandon, 2012; Halls & Wien, 2013; Russ, Peters, Krasny, & Stedman, 2015).



Despite many efforts over the years to re-conceptualize the curriculum, outdated models of education based on predetermined outcomes remain widespread (Pinar, Reynolds, Slattery, & Taubman, 1995; Riley & Rich, 2011; Osberg & Biesta, 2008). There is currently a great need for new and/or revitalized approaches to education that take into account the rapid pace at which society is changing. Riley and Rich (2011) contend that “the world has moved on as schools remain content with busy work that looks to the past rather than to the future” (p. 103). As it stands, *instructionist* approaches (i.e., where the goal of schooling is to transmit facts and procedures to students) are failing to provide students with the skills they need “to participate in this new kind of society” (Sawyer, 2014, p. 8). Harkening back to Dewey’s earlier propositions, Sawyer (2014) suggests that there needs to be “an emphasis on deeper conceptual understanding” (p. 8) of how to apply facts and procedures to real-world situations, and building on students’ prior knowledge and experiences. Furthermore, rigid schooling and assessment practices are creating intensified teaching atmospheres (Ballet & Kelchermans, 2009) where educators “need to cover a large amount of material...[and] prepare students to score well on standardized tests” (Sawyer, 2014, p. 6). This not only promotes the “deskilling” of teachers (Apple & Jungck, 1990), but also puts many students at risk of school failure and lowered self-esteem (Kearns, 2011).

Particularly in Canada, there is an urgent need for pedagogical approaches that incorporate holistic and ecological ways of knowing to create a reconciled society where all voices are valued and heard, and where all students have the opportunity to succeed (Battiste, 2011; Riley & Rich, 2011). If we revisit the metaphor of the students as individual trees, we can begin to understand how important it is to foster children's "natural" growth in Canadian schools, and promote an ecological model of learning that celebrates diversity. Embracing the philosophy of emergent curriculum is one way to achieve this goal, as it is a holistic approach that allows for student self-discovery (Yusuf, 2010).

Understanding Emergent Curriculum Using A Collaborative Arts-Informed Approach

As we observed the growth of our collective tree and all the unique drawings, we developed several new understandings of emergent curriculum and what it has to offer. For instance, the project served as a good example of how—even within open-ended activities—enabling constraints can nurture creativity. People were constrained by the small index cards we provided and the crayons, and the request to draw a tree. As is evident from the included examples, we received all sorts of responses that fell within, without and around these constraints—many diverse expressions and creative offerings.

Close inspection of the individual drawings reveals similarities and differences that contributed to our understanding of how such activities clarify individual creative emergence, but also a kind of group emergence. For instance, all their trees are quite different and unique in their own way (as Betty observed in her classroom). Some have colour whereas others do not; some have foliage and added details (such as the swing), whereas others only show the branches and trunk of the tree. However, the trunk of the tree was still central to almost all of the drawings, and the individuality of each piece was constrained by the need to conform to tree archetypes (with a few notable exceptions, such as the few abstracted pieces). A similar tree schema (such as as the 'ice cream scoop with sprinkles for foliage and fruit') was observed across several drawings, but was adapted in different ways by the drawers.

In terms of technique, some chose expression and gesture (focusing on the 'feeling' of the tree), while others chose control and representational lines (focusing on the appearance of the tree). Some seemed more attentive to the materials (was this about joining in a drawing activity?), while others focused primarily on the subject (was this about remembering or imagining trees?). While the invitation and situation seemed to favour realism as a visual response, some addressed the political or symbolic through abstraction, or associations, like drawing the tree as a lung. The evocativeness of the content, open array of materials, and the relevance of the subject matter to both personal and community memory and concern, are all features that influenced the success of this shared creative task as a reflection of emergent curriculum. The many readings of the task and the aesthetic choices made created a sense of community and diversity that is at the core of how we view emergent curriculum.

As time went on, some of the drawings fell, were displaced, or disappeared altogether. Some drawings did not depict trees at all. These aspects of the process, from our perspective, highlight the importance of expecting the unexpected and remaining open to different emerging possibilities. Emergent curriculum encourages teachers and students to understand that learning is never finished or complete; we are continuously growing and changing and moving toward the unknown. Our role in curating the work also highlights the role teachers can play in observing and drawing out the interests and skills of the individual students, and the ways in which this process allows for a group curriculum to emerge.

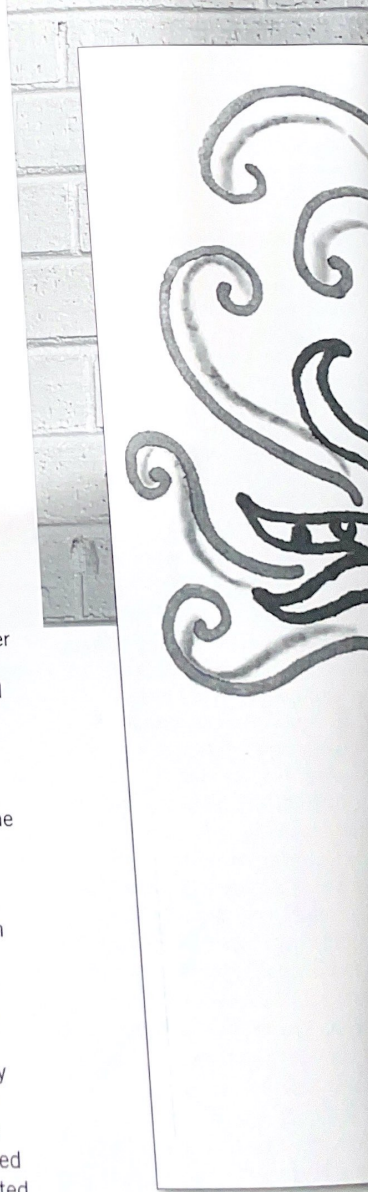
While our approach was almost entirely laissez-faire, in a classroom context might we have somehow enhanced the emergent learning experience? Perhaps by inviting students to group their images with others that somehow connected to their own? By inviting students to pick a favourite image that someone else had created, and use it as inspiration for their own? By inviting students to collaborate on a tree together?

From an educator's perspective, the project provided a subtle opportunity to infuse something artful into the Faculty of Education environment. We enjoyed how it quietly caught the interest and imagination of so many – those who contributed to the tree and those who simply stopped to check it out. It became common for people to stop, look, move closer, tentatively take a card, and then allow a few moments of art making into their day. Many stopped with friends to point out their own drawings, or to make comments on others' images.

In many ways, the arts and emergent curriculum go hand-in-hand. Art-making is, by nature, a process of emergence and continuous change, as artists learn to embrace "happy mistakes" that lead to new discoveries. This type of open-ended collective art project also has the potential to encourage participants to learn from each other as they observe the different creative pieces being added week to week. We noticed that several drawings resembled each other and heard people comment on the techniques as they looked closely at the drawings.

Conclusion

With this public art initiative we hoped to showcase the unique offerings each individual brings to the collective learning context. Using the symbol of the tree from Betty's narrative helped us conceptualize what emergent curriculum means and visualize what it might look like in practice. The process of making the tree led us to think about emergent curriculum in a different way than if we were to simply read and interpret Betty's story. Although this activity had some constraints (e.g., tree theme and limited materials), it still allowed for individual creativity to emerge and provided participants with the chance to engage in artistic creation and appreciation. For us, the resulting artwork was intriguing, inspiring, and brightened our days. And judging from the 250 drawings we collected, others felt the same.





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