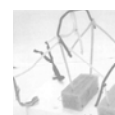




# ARTIFACTS

## as a Research Tool

by **Bonnie Soroke**



### Background & Methodology

**This is a brief account of how I used artifacts as a tool during my ethnographic research at the Reading and Writing Centre, a unique educational environment in Duncan, British Columbia. The Centre is part of the local university-college, yet located in a storefront building downtown. The two teachers moved their fundamental classes here to better accommodate their vision to be more of a learner-run centre. I wanted to look at how power and authority were operating within the Centre by exploring the perceptions and experiences of the people there. I was asking what works for students and teachers at the Centre and questioning why.**

**The data collection involved five months of fieldwork during 2001. I spent two full-days each week at the centre – for participatory observation, interviews with ten students and the two teachers, and two group talks with student interviewees. During the year prior to starting my fieldwork I attended meetings and events at the centre to meet people and**

*I was asking what works for students and teachers at the Centre and questioning why.*

**engage in informal conversations and observation. Throughout I wrote daily field notes and a research journal. One of my research goals was to involve people as much as possible as research participants, despite their busy schedule and lives. Besides the interviews and group talks, their participation included ongoing consultation about the research process, negotiating decisions about my involvement and scheduling, and dialoguing about my early analysis.**

**Data analysis involved transcribing all interviews and group talks, then coding the data and generating themes using those codes. I then returned to meet with the research participants to discuss the themes. Artifacts were used during this time as a means of testing ongoing interpretations and analysis of the data. I created sculptural artifacts that represented my responses to observations and interviews with students, and then shared those artifacts with people at the Centre. As well, artifacts were used as a research tool for communication and reciprocity and to generate data.**

## Rationale

The tools one chooses as researcher help shape the ethnographic description, whether the tools are pen, computer, camera or artifact. These tools are an extension of one's physical being and a reflection of who one is. An artifact is defined as an object produced or shaped by human craft. Creating and viewing artifacts also suggests the presence of an aesthetic experience that is both mindful and reflective. I create artifacts to help make sense (and nonsense) within my life, using art as a thinking tool and a vital means of reflexivity.

The materials I choose are mainly zippers and coloured telephone wire. Most of the sculptures are quite malleable, and have the capacity to be altered. The zippers can be opened and closed, the shapes and postures can be changed. The use of recycled and common materials is a statement of my approach to the process of art. My tendency is to use what is on hand and freely available as the creation of artifacts is integrated into my daily living. Fun and humour are essential elements here. As an educator, I workfully play and playfully work to disrupt the mystique of art and the art-making process so that art as an experience is more accessible.

## Tool of Communication

During the first month of my fieldwork at the Centre, I introduced some zipper sculptures depicting relationship dynamics in education. These artifacts

represent personal educational experiences – that of a silenced student in a teacher-centred environment contrasted with an experience where we were all more equally engaged and connected through our participation. My intent was to share my own experiences as a student, illustrating my issues regarding power and authority in education, and also to explore those concepts with people at the Centre. I wanted to do this in a way that used alternative communication, humour and playfulness to make a connection with people. So during their weekly meeting I brought these sculptures and showed them with a brief explanation. Responses to this first presentation from the audience of twelve people ranged from puzzled faces and indifference to outbursts of laughter. The laughter I courted and welcomed as a sign of engagement. I was aware of the possible mystique and potential alienation from the use of artifacts and the art process, so it was important to me to keep the presentation light and interactive. A few people asked questions about the sculptures, inquiring when, how and why they were made. When the noise level rose at one point, someone called out a comment about “zipping up”.

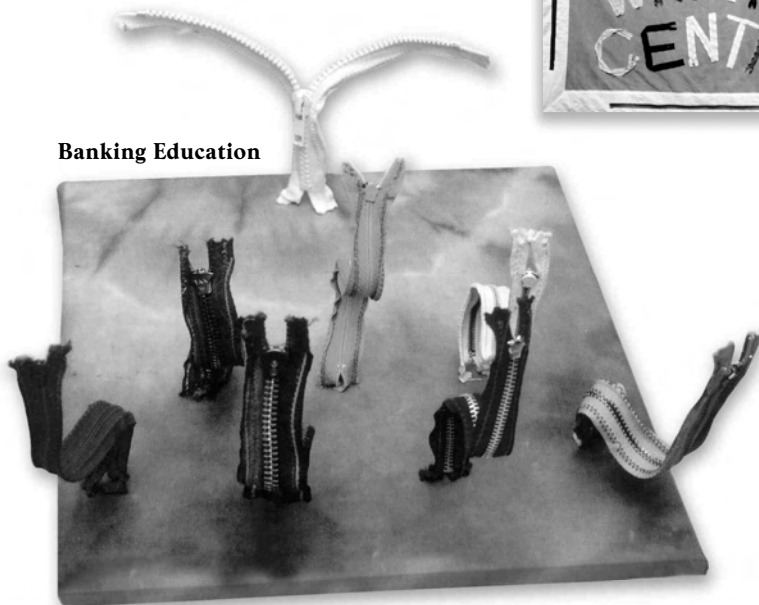
## Tool of Analysis/Thinking Tool

In this research process, artifacts have been a way of testing themes and interpretations of my data. One way that I responded to interviews and observations was to create sculptures, and then use them to reflect back my perceptions of students' experiences, illustrating their issues and concerns.

Interview participants spoke to me



Banking Education



Collaboration

about their previous experiences of being students, where they felt teachers hovering over them, asking and checking and pressuring. We talked about the *push relationship* between students and teachers at the Reading and Writing Centre, discussing the differences and similarities to hovering. In our group talks, we used the sculpture (sometimes changing the postures), to explore those experiences and to further explore the issues involved in relationship dynamics amongst students and teachers at the Centre.



**Voices**

Voices was initially made in response to a student who talked about his experience of the power of the teacher's voice, and how the different tones of voice affected him as a student. Another student talked about the labeling he had experienced as child and how what comes out of people's mouths has affected him. I've been reflecting upon this Voices piece in writing up and analyzing the data. I've been struggling with giving equal respect and authority to the voices of students and teachers, to the voices of the literature and to my own voice.

Artifacts can serve as a thinking tool, a reflexive tool for researcher and for participants. Through the interviews and observations I became increasingly aware of the power of relationships amongst students and how that is played out in this educational environment. Queen Bee was made in response to comments during an interview with a student who described another student, who she perceives to have

the power of decision at the Centre, as someone who "thinks she's smart and is the Queen Bee." I've gone through paradigm shifts in the course of this research process and the meanings related to this sculpture have been changing for me, changes that are expressed in this little poem:

Queen Bee thinks she's smart.  
Queen Bee IS smart.  
Queen Bee knows what she knows  
and uses her knowing to ACT!

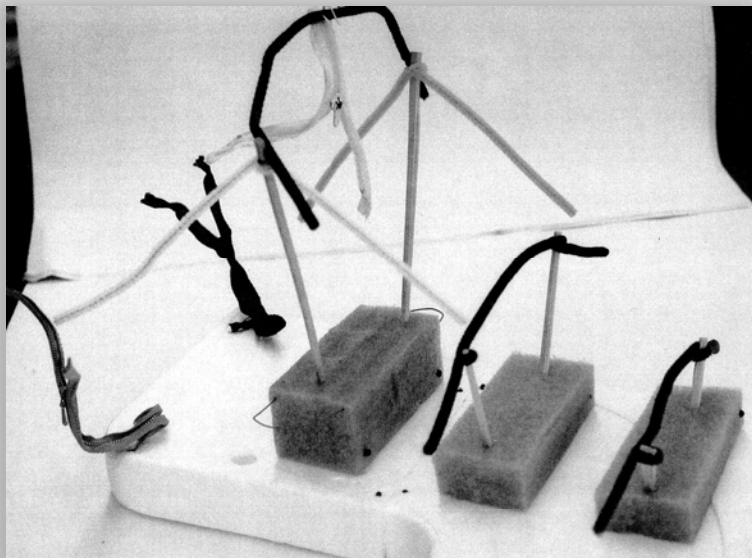
Creating and viewing artifacts suggests the presence of an aesthetic experience that is both mindful and reflective.

## Data Generation Tool

During my fieldwork at the Reading and Writing Centre I wanted to create opportunities for people to play with the sculptures and the raw materials. During a weekly meeting at the Centre, I volunteered to organize an activity on a day when students, teachers and tutors from the community's Intercultural Centre were going to visit. A student piped up, "Why not use the zipper people?" This



**QueenBee**



**Bert's sculpture**

suggestion was a welcomed prompt that led to an activity I facilitated that involved discussion and sculpture creation around the topic 'Being an Adult Student'.

In small groups people talked together, then sculpted those experiences and presented them to the full group. Some chose to work individually on a sculpture, others created together in groups of two or three. The next photographs depict sculptures by Bert and Diane, two of the interview participants who chose to attend the group activity.

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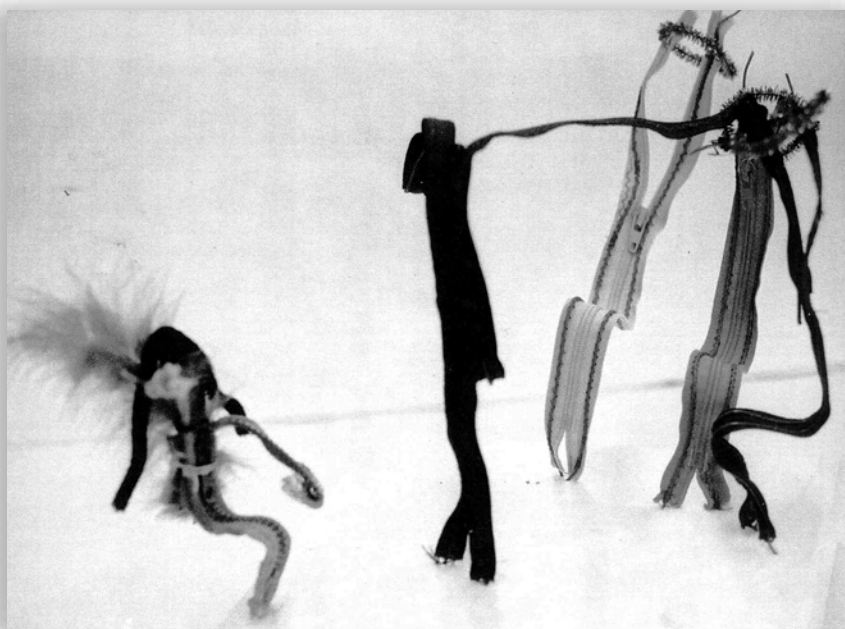
Bert portrays himself as the white zipper swinging from the black trapeze line, and explains:

On one of my exciting days I feel like doing things, like taking risks and swinging up there. I made a strong base in order to swing. You start on the lower bar and move up to the next one because the highest one is too big a jump. Sometimes I am also the people on the ground, sitting, watching.

Bert's sculpture and his accompanying story woke me up and I hadn't even been aware that I was asleep. During the interview with Bert, during the group talks and in our casual conversations I felt I was hearing him tell the same stories over and over. I realized later that I had somewhat closed off to his voice. I was listening but I was not hearing. After being woken up by Bert and his sculpture, I started looking and listening in quite a different way – more empathic and aware of how he experienced the Reading and Writing Centre, and activities that he tried. I learned a lot about risks from Bert. He helped me see that our risk-taking is related to the whole context of where we are, who we are and where we have come from.

Diane's sculpture and her story about it led me to a deeper understanding of her perception of the behaviour of the teachers at Centre. During our conversations, Diane took an adamant stance against the use of the term 'push' which other people used to describe relationship dynamics amongst students and teachers. Diane asserted that teachers did not push when they worked with individual students.

In this sculpture she created with a group, she is depicted as the zipper in the lower left. The teacher (middle zipper) and group are zippers of the same



**Diane's sculpture**

colour. She used a contrasting zipper colour along with beads and a feather to represent her First Nations heritage. Diane's story about the sculpture:

When I was in school, the teacher always faced away from me, and I was always saying "I want some help, I need some help." The teacher pays attention to all those other same colour people, who are like angels and can do no wrong and they are all connected. This is a story of discrimination, but it can be the same for anyone who feels left out, who feels on the edge.

The experience of creating sculptures together contributed to my deeper awareness about students' experiences at the Centre and pushed me to uncover and reflect upon my own assumptions. Issues and stories emerged while talking about the sculptures that never came up during our conversations and interviews.

## Tool of Reciprocity

I see research as a process of building relationships and learning together from those relationships. Thus one of my research issues was a concern about reciprocity – I wanted to publicly acknowledge the time and energy people gave through interviews and the many conversations. I wanted to honour the relationships we formed through the process of the research. I had noticed that when people from the Centre went out in public for fundraising or public relations work, they used paper signs to tell where they were from. I

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decided to make them a portable, re-usable sign, and created a cloth banner using zipper letters to spell out Reading & Writing Centre.

I also wanted to celebrate their work as readers and writers. The Reading and Writing Centre regularly informally publishes student writing. They have also formally published two books by students. In Reader/Writer one of the zippers is reading a miniature version of one of those books. After I gave them this sculpture, they published the second book, so for that book launch I created a tiny replica of that book as well.



Reader and Writer

## Tensions & Limitations

Although my original intent in using artifacts was to minimize the use of written text with student participants, I was not initially cognizant that the use of art is another kind of literacy, where we are required to 'read' the artifact. Rick, one of the students, helped me attune to the necessity of assuming the role of guide when viewing the artifacts. During our Group Talk, when people had been laughing about the variety of ways to change the positions of the sculptural figures, I noticed that Rick was relatively quiet. He commented to me later that he could understand the humour only after I had explained that the zippers were human teacher/student characters in the Hovering sculpture. We also further talked about the differences in people's responses to the artifacts and how interpretation can vary from person to person.

One student's interpretation of the zippers caused me to reflect upon these materials as gender specific, perhaps seen as women's sewing notions. During the beginning of our first group talk, I had placed several zippers (with the wire sewn into them) and some foam bases around the tables where we would be sitting. Daniel picked up one of the zippers, played around with it, bending it into shapes. Then he attempted to engage the two other male students, Rick and Matthew, in a bantering and comparison of the size and stiffness of their zippers, asking them, "How big is your zipper?" and laughing. They didn't respond, and after a few more comments to them, Daniel threw his zipper on the table, saying, "this is so stupid." He turned his

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swivel chair away from the table. Daniel's machismo engagement with the zippers was a reading and interpretation that wasn't shared by others at the time. I chose not to comment or respond as well.

Throughout the research process, I wanted to respond respectfully within all encounters with participants, and remained conscious of not assuming roles of art connoisseur or therapist. The use of artifacts can open up potentially powerful emotional places, thus it is important to tread carefully and attentively. During that same group talk, Bert and Matthew chose to play around with the zippers. One of them set three zippers into a foam base, explaining that two zippers are "yakking together" and the third one is more distant and backing away. Matthew immediately responded to Bert's creation, saying that he related to the third zipper character that was backing away because he feels a bit like an outsider at the Centre. While we discussed those feelings, Matthew and Bert changed and manipulated the sculpture to show how Matthew would like to see himself at the Centre – he faced the zipper towards and closer to the other two talking together.

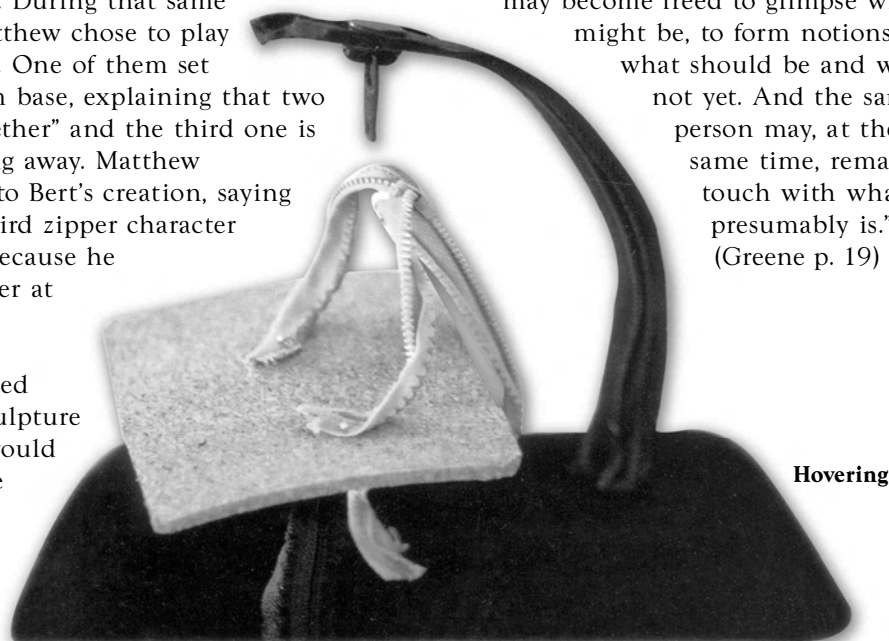
Another interesting 'reading' of the artifacts occurred by the general public. After the Adult Student workshop, we placed several of the creations in one of the storefront display windows and later heard that passers-by thought the Centre might be a new sewing notions store!

## Final Words

My use of artifacts in research has been a provocative exploration that continues. The use of art and imagination as tools can be integrated into the general research process to help open up and go to places not always accessible through research traditions of talking, listening and observing. Research is a place where we work to uncover

unacknowledged assumptions and implicit knowledge. The ethnographer's job is to dig deeper into what is assumed to be common sense or normal behaviour.

"To tap into imagination is to become able to break with what is supposedly fixed and finished, objectively and independently real. It is to see beyond what the imaginer has called normal or "common-sensible" and to carve out new orders in experience. Doing so, a person may become freed to glimpse what might be, to form notions of what should be and what is not yet. And the same person may, at the same time, remain in touch with what presumably is." (Greene p. 19) ■



Hovering

**Bonnie Soro** is presently completing her thesis research, mothering a teen-aged son, facilitating art workshops and doing consulting work with the RiPAL network. She has also worked as an early childhood educator, ESL tutor, EFL teacher in Japan, tree planter and VOJ (various other jobs). Music, art and motorcycling feed her soul.

### SOURCES:

Greene, Maxine (1985). *Releasing the Imagination: Essays on Education, the Arts, and Social Change*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

### WEBSITES:

Reading and Writing Centre: <http://literacy.cc.mala.bc.ca/>

Bonnie Soro: [www.soro.com](http://www.soro.com)