

International Journal of Education & the Arts

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<http://www.ijea.org/>

ISSN: 1529-8094

Volume 20 Number 3

February 5, 2019

Literacy Events in Writing Play Workshops with Children Aged Three to Five: A Study of Agential Cuts with the Artographic Triple Dimensions as a Lens

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Citation: Bendiksen, S. A., Østern, A., Belliveau, G. (2019). Literacy events in writing play workshops with children aged three to five: A study of agential cuts with the artographic triple dimensions as a lens. *International Journal of Education & the Arts*, 20(3). Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.18113/P8ijea20n3>

Abstract

The aim of this article is to explore how the multiple perspectives offered by an artographer's lens contribute to three literacy events generated by *writing play*¹ activities for children three to five years old. These events are part of a more comprehensive study of emergent literacy in writing play workshops, focusing on writing in different displays and with different writing tools. The artographer in the comprehensive study is Solveig Åsgard Bendiksen, also the first author in this article. The two other co-authors contribute with artographic methodology and with concepts from agential realism in the analysis of three literacy events. The intra-actions between the artographer, the children, the affects, the affordance of rich materials, and the context as performative agents in diffractive reading produced a number of findings concerning emergent writing literacy, especially concerning emergent cultural literacy.

Introduction

The aim of this article is to explore what meaning-making the triple dimensions offered by an artographer's lens make visible in three literacy events generated by writing play activities. These events are part of a more comprehensive series of writing play workshops designed and carried out by Solveig Åsgard Bendiksen, first author of this article and the artographer of this study. Within an artographer's lens three dimensions are entwined in one person: the artist's, the teacher's, and the researcher's perspectives.

Solveig invited the two co-authors to contribute with their perspectives on the study she designed in writing play workshops for children aged three to five years, focusing on writing in different displays and with different writing tools. Her approach in the workshops was performative, in that they were practice-led (Gergen & Gergen, 2018; Haseman, 2006). The overall design of the workshops is described elsewhere (Bendiksen, in review), as such in this article we focus more closely on exploring three specific literacy events with writing and the meaning-making that emerged.

The artographic methodology was initially developed at the University of British Columbia (UBC) in Canada with Dr. Rita Irwin (2004) as the pioneer behind this approach. George Belliveau, who is one of the artographic collaborators at UBC, is a co-author on this article. Anna-Lena Østern, also a co-author, has followed the process of the workshops, and her contribution to this article comes from the perspective of an arts educator with a special focus on the intra-actions of performative agents within the perspective of agential realism (Barad,

¹ The term *writing play* is coined by the researcher (Bendiksen, 2017) in order to underline the play dimension in exploration of writing.

2001, 2007; Dolphijn, van der Tuin, & Barad, 2012). Video-observations from the workshops, researcher diaries, and field notes from the workshops serve as the research material that support the analysis for this article. Solveig shares her first-hand insights in designing and developing the writing workshops inside her research diaries, and these become pivotal data as she reflexively (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2009) shares her stream-of-thinking. We call each of these first-hand accounts from the researcher diaries a “Transcript of memory.”

I had thoroughly planned my first meeting with the children and what I wanted to ask them. My most urgent concern was to inspire them and get their attention. I asked, “Can you write?” The children said “Yes.” So I asked, “Do you wish to write with me?” The nine children nodded. So I began with my first prompt: “Show me your ways of writing. You can write your name, or write what you want to!” Two aspects were important for me: to use the word write (not draw), and to not lead them into thinking that I am teaching them to write. I wanted them to show me their ways of writing. (Transcript 1 of memory, 18.11.10)

Solveig’s perspective is from inside of the writing play workshops as an art teacher, artist, and researcher. Her material is analyzed in dialogue with second and third authors. We call this triple perspective *investigator triangulation*, because we explore the same literacy events from different angles (Leavy, 2018). The methodological perspectives are informed by artography², agential realism (Barad, 2003, 2007; Dolphijn et al., 2012), as well as an overall performative aesthetic and multimodal approach to emerging writing literacy. We describe these methodological and theoretical perspectives in more detail below. First though, we wish to define two concepts connected to literacy that are integral to this article: literacy event and cultural literacy.

Literacy Event

Our definition of a *literacy event* embraces practices where one person or more are involved with literacy (e.g., writing, reading narrating, drawing, performing) (Björklund, 2008; Pahl, 2007). The event can be delimited, and in research can function as a unit of analysis (or in this article as an agential cut, a concept that we explain later). This literacy practice often takes place in social settings (a kindergarten context, for example) as it does in

² Artography is often used with the forward slashes representing the in-between space of the artist, researcher, and teacher identities. For the purposes of this article we follow Gouzouasis’ (2008) notion of removing them to emphasize the interconnectedness among these identities.

this study. When the word event is added to literacy the focus is on the process and the collaborative exploration in the event. Burnett and Merchant (2018) find the notion of a “literacy event” problematic because of its boundedness to time and place. They, instead, write about “literacy-as-event” underlining the relationality and “the fluid and elusive nature of meaning-making” (Burnett & Merchant, 2018, p.1). In each event there are multiple potentialities between people and things, beyond what we can perceive. The literacy event usually has several participants and results are not looked upon as final, but temporary.

There exists an extensive body of research on literacy studies, offering a variety of different lenses (Mills, 2016). Of special interest for our study is the one carried out by Kuby and Rucker (2016), discussed in “Go Be a Writer!: Expanding the Curricular Boundaries of Literacy Learning with Children.” The authors of this book explore the poststructuralist and posthumanist theories embodied in a writers’ studio³ with children, which resonates with our study. Kuby and Rucker (2016) discuss characteristics of poststructuralist thinking as multiple truths, realities, subjectivities, identities, ways of being and knowing, referring to Lenz Taguchi (2010, p. 94). Their study builds and expands upon the theoretical thinking of Deleuze and Guattari (1987), Barad (2007), and Lenz Taguchi (2010), offering fresh ways of conceptualizing and understanding literacy practices. The authors also recognize the Reggio Emilia philosophy of early childhood education and its regard for the environment and materials as a third pedagogue, as described in Pacini-Ketchabaw, Kind, and Kochers’ (2016) book, *Encounters with Materials⁴ in Early Childhood Education*. Pacini-Ketchabaw et al. (2016) show how materials are conceptualized as active participants in children’s encounters with materials, in order to gain human insight. Their work is illuminating regarding thinking with materials based on poststructuralist thinking.

An Aesthetic and Multimodal Approach

As an arts teacher and teacher educator Solveig wanted to create a project around early literacy from the perspective of an aesthetic and multimodal approach to young children’s writing play. Aesthetic, then, is denoted as sensuous, with use of all the senses and with focus on the exploration of form (Hohr, 2013; Sørensen, 2015). Kress and van Leeuwen (2001) have described a modality as means of making meaning. Jewitt, Bezemer and O’Halloran (2016) assert that meaning-making involves the production of multimodal wholes: “If we want to study meaning, we need to attend to all semiotic resources being used to make a complete whole” (p. 3). The notion *writing play* was created by Solveig in order to underline the process of playful exploration. When children experiment with form, signs and letters, they

³ Their classroom was turned into a writer’s studio with space and time and material for writing.

⁴ <http://encounterswithmaterials.com/>

are influenced by the writing culture they are immersed in every day. The young children are, however, in a process of becoming literate, and probably open to experimentation and challenges. The nine children who participated in the workshops were all the children in one kindergarten group. They came from seven different ethnic groups, some with different writing systems. The invitation to write playfully in an explorative way can be solved in different ways. The writing task might promote an awareness of letters, print, text, but also a more multimodal and broad conception of what communication is about. The literacy events might contribute to an emergent cultural literacy for children aged three to five years.

Cultural Literacy

A definition of *cultural* literacy consists of the elements of cultural understanding of a situation or a phenomenon, called 'text.' As you read the text, you also read the world. In multiple literacies theory, Masny (2014, p. 116) maintains that this is reading the text and the world, and self as text, and thus becoming other. She is interested in how literacies intersect in becoming. Sanders (2012) writes about Rosenblatt's significant impact on New Literacies research, noting how Rosenblatt was aware of the need for a new mindset when approaching new forms of literacies, and how to make transactions with multimodal texts. Colonna (2014) defines cultural literacy in this way: "Being culturally literate, in the most basic sense, allows one to more fully participate in public life. When people try to understand each other, they can come together to know the world much better" (p. 322). Hirsch (1987) has discussed cultural literacy from the perspective of a common ground, containing some elements that everybody should know about in order to be able to participate in society. This is an issue with huge potential regarding what kinds of cultural literacy arts education wishes to promote in society, and following this, what affordances (Gibson, 1986; Kress, 2010) could be offered very young children regarding literacy. The literacy events studied in this article are part of this conversation in an educational context. That the participating children come from seven different ethnic groups is an important reason for the choice of the kindergarten group that Solveig selected for her artistic intervention:

I wished to create opportunities for an intercultural meeting, where the participants could share the literacy competences they have and use them in the literacy events. I wanted to contribute to a broader and more aesthetic approach to literacy based upon their starting point. (Transcript 2 of memory 18.11.10)

A number of questions guide the exploration of the literacy events. For instance: Are the children interested in exploring literacy by the means Solveig affords? What can we observe regarding the experiences of the children? Do they play with the materials? Is the agency of

the material visible in the response from the children? How is the triple role of Solveig visible in the writing workshops?

Research Design

The overarching research question that is examined in this article centers on: *What meaning-making does the artographer's lens make visible in three literacy events generated by writing play?*

The project from which we have chosen these literacy events can, as a whole, be described as an artistic intervention (Leavy, 2018), where the writing play activities of the young writers are acknowledged as cultural-aesthetic expressions. We consider the study as ethnographic, because it contributes to a cultural portrait of the workshop design, processes and context, with the researcher immersed as a full participant and designer, as well as participant observer. Besides the nine children and Solveig, the parents of the children also were invited to participate in writing play together with their child, and many parents participated regularly.

The writing style for this article is meant to be evocative and diverse, which a performative approach encourages. As such, in the writing of the article we share these literacy events through quotations, narratives, video clips, photos, and poetic ethnography. Solveig here gives a glimpse into the first literacy event "The treasure chests." She writes in her researcher journal:

At ten o'clock I open the green heavy door to the space designed as a drawing room: the kids in first; they take off their coats, catch sight of the treasure chests on a blue, circular carpet; nail-polishing; joyous grown up audience; butterflies in my stomach, I sit down on the carpet with the kids, my assistant is filming. I hope he'll remember to film only the hands and the writing. I look forward to the moment when these three hours have passed.

Everyone wants to open the chest and "unpack" paper rolls, skin pieces, pencils, feathers... I ask: Can anyone of you conjure? I want to show you a magic trick. I show the paper with invisible letters (prepared beforehand). Do you think I can conjure letters on the "empty" sheet of paper? I lift the paper up against the light and they can see a shimmer of "invisible" letters. I iron the paper with the flat iron, iron so my name becomes visible, read it out aloud. They want to write lemon fonts! They smell, taste the lemon paint, lie on their stomachs around the treasure chest, write with their fingers on the

A2-paper sheet, round forms, letters, one is dropping dots... (Researcher journal, entry 1, 11.03.11)

Theoretical Frame of Reference

In the following section a theoretical frame of reference is presented, followed by a description of the methodological choices. We then analyze the literacy events from an artographic lens. The three events all contain an intervention with an arts educational perspective. The reasons for the choice of these selected literacy events are twofold: (1) there is collaboration between an adult and children; and (2) the events expose different approaches to writing play. Furthermore, all events are examples of what it can mean to dwell in the present (Barad, 2007), embracing the fluid and elusive character of the literacy event.

Artography as a Research Methodology

Artographers “/.../ are living their work, representing their understandings, and performing their pedagogical positions as they integrate knowing, doing, and making through aesthetic experiences that convey meaning rather than facts” (Irwin, 2004, p. 34).

Artography is best described as a methodology that emphasizes the process through which scholars draw upon their artist, researcher, and teacher identities to artistically engage in research and question their understandings (Lea, Belliveau, Beck, & Wager, 2011). Solveig, as the teacher, artist, and researcher in this study embraces this triple notion as she works alongside the young children in each of the described units below. Using an artographic lens for this study allows the porous and emergent learning to surface, for as Springgay, Irwin, and Kind (2005) suggest, this methodology invites “a fluid orientation creating its rigor through continuous reflexivity and analysis” (p. 903). A key concept of artography is to involve practitioners to reflect on tensions during the process of teaching, art-making, and research, honoring and critically writing about these moments as they emerge (Belliveau, 2015; Carter, 2014). Therefore, exploring the cultural literacy engagements in Solveig’s three examples from an artographic perspective illuminates the possibilities of new insights and understandings to be discovered because of the reflexive and reflective emphasis. Reflexive is understood as the researcher paying attention to the process, and afterwards reflecting over the events.

Artographic explorations recognize and embrace the process, and consciously yearn to investigate the actual doing within the art-making and aesthetic practices. As Solveig works within her literacy practices, she continuously reflects back on her process and her environment. The focus is on the present, the actual engagement of doing. The artistry in artography is not about completing a static

aesthetic piece of art, framing it to appreciate it from afar. Quite the opposite, artography as a methodology consists of folding back the layers, asking new questions, and generating an understanding of what it means to dwell in the present (Belliveau, 2015). Artography offers an approach that embraces the simultaneity, multiplicity and complexity of Solveig's practice. As illustrated in the practices below, her artist, teacher, and researcher identities reflect on the tensions during the process of art-making, as she honors and critically writes about these literacy moments as they emerge.

Performative, Aesthetic and Multimodal Approach to Writing Play as Literacy Practice

Solveig designed all the workshops, and these were respectively captured by film. Solveig was active as an artist-teacher, as we describe below in the event named "The Treasure Chests." Her vision is informed by her intertwined role of being a teacher, artist, and researcher throughout the process designing and carrying out the writing play workshops. Her memories float through her story about what she thinks while designing the workshops, and why. These memories offer insights to her expertise as an art teacher, experiences as an artist, her understanding as a teacher and teacher educator, and her wish to contribute to enabling the children to engage in aesthetic experiences:

The point of departure is form. Young children's writing and drawing mean that they give form; they leave some traces after them. They write with their fingers perhaps on a mirror that has become misty. The child finds a stick and writes in sand, clay, mud. It is an original quality to leave traces behind oneself. It is about communication. You wish to communicate with the world. You need the form or the signs in order to be able to communicate with the world. (Transcript 3 of memory, 10.12.10)

Burnard, et al. (2006) maintain that seeing creative texts as socially situated traces of practice—that is, as evidence of what kinds of practices informed that text—could support teachers in extending the possibilities of particular kinds of literacy events, practices, and discourses within education. Performative is understood as based in practice, emanating from practice, as well as expressed as practice (Gergen & Gergen, 2018; Schechner, 2013). The performative, aesthetic and multimodal approach to the writing play is intended to be such an extension in an early childhood setting. The aesthetic approach involves a variety of sensuous materials and tools. It certainly involves a focus on experimenting with form. The performative and aesthetic approach informs all the workshops.

Intra-Actions, Materiality, and Children-as-Agents from the Perspective of Agential Realism

Artographic methodology allows for different positions as a researcher, but inspiration might often come from social constructionism, body phenomenology, and in the last decade or so, more and more from post-human thought as in agential realism (Barad, 2007). Many learning theories from recent decades have been interested in the importance of space, time, and teaching materials, but epistemologically they consider artifacts as passive objects in need of active human agents (Lenz Taguchi, 2012 p. 12). A different understanding of the relation between human matter and non-human matter is called *an ontological turn*, promoting an onto-epistemology (Barad, 2003; 2007; Dolphijn et al., 2012). The concept *onto-epistemology* denotes not only theories about how we produce knowledge (epistemology), but also how we understand the world, artifacts, materiality, and ourselves (ontology). Our knowledge production is part of our material being from the perspective offered by agential realism (Lenz Taguchi, 2012, p. 12). In some research projects (Nordtømme, 2011), this post-human thinking is an “add on” to, for instance, an overarching social semiotic and hermeneutic approach. In this article, the onto-epistemological perspective from agential realism vitalizes our thinking and contributes to addressing difference in the writing play literacy events. The researcher Solveig allows herself to move around in order to see more, from different positions. With the perspective of agential realism the literacy events under study are moments of knowing in being (Barad, 2007). Hultman and Lenz Taguchi (2010) write about intra-activity in the following way:

Intra-activity relates to physicist terminology and to a relationship between any organism and matter (human and non-human), which are understood *not* to have clear and inherent boundaries, but are always in a state of intra-activity of higher or lesser intensity or speed . . . all bodies in the event are to be understood as causes in relation to each other. (p. 530, emphasis in original)

This notion of intra-activity is part of the knowing-in-being. When we describe the literacy events we make agential cuts through a course of events; we “freeze” the moments. Magnusson (2017), who positions herself within agential realism, argues that experience is not one individual’s but it is “something that emanates, develops and moves with the relations they [the children] are together with. Aesthetics, then, is the common culture but also something that might challenge it and explore it” (p. 21, authors’ translation).

In our analysis, inspired by agential realism, the notion of *diffraction* is used (Barad, 2007). It is a term from physics describing, for instance, how waves change direction, and spread in different ways when meeting a barrier, or resistance. Difference is a key concept in a diffractive analysis. Regarding performative agents, the question might be what they produce

that makes a difference per se. In line with Magnusson (2017), we consider diffractions as ways of reading different insights and discoveries, possibilities and impossibilities through each other, focusing on details, similarities, and differences. We diffract with the artographic lens, considering the artist dimension, the teacher dimension and the researcher dimension in order to gain insights.

From the perspective of agential realism, human actors and non-human matter are considered to intra-act (Barad, 2007; Lenz Taguchi, 2012). Intra-action can be described as an entanglement, a floating interaction between the agents participating in the event, where also the materiality is an agent, likewise the affects passing through the event. Ontologically, we cannot distinguish the borders between person and matter (human and non-human) (Lenz Taguchi, 2012, p. 15). One example of this might be the first literacy event described in this article, where the children write with lemon ink, inspired to smell and taste the “ink” as an exploration of what the lemon produces as a form of meaning making.

When listening to Solveig’s streams of thought, regarding the writing play workshops, we can feel, sense, and become affected by the materiality of the displays and the writing tools she offers the children. When watching the video cuts documenting the literacy events, we can notice the intra-actions between Solveig, the writing materials, the affordances for the children, and what they produce. In the analysis of the three literacy events we have chosen as examples in this article, we are in dialogue with thinking inspired by agential realism. The children are co-creating the events. The performative agency of the children is a prerequisite for the events, and for the becoming of Solveig’s project. If the children had not wanted to participate in the writing play events, there would have been no research (see also Magnusson, 2017, p. 23). The children, the artographer Solveig, the parents, the different cultural backgrounds, the pedagogues, the assistants, the guests, the displays, the writing tools, the different locations, the weather conditions, the affects and intensities floating through the events, are all intertwined. They all contribute to the literacy events; they are all performative agents in intra-actions. Even we, as authors of this article, are performative agents in intra-action with the other performative agents when we produce this text.

When considering the literacy events as ongoing, floating processes, where many performative agents influence the development of the event, we as researchers can only make agential cuts. We describe frozen moments of the literacy events, whilst being quite aware that the next agential cut will be different, because many aspects are changed, and that the event is a fluid, elusive, and ever-changing process.

Diffraction Analysis – The Artographic Dimensions as Lenses

Informed by the performative approach and the artographic triple lenses, we now describe agential cuts from three literacy events. After the description of a certain literacy event, we carry out a diffractive analysis, focusing on which performative agents we pay attention to, and what the performative agents produce, change, or make possible in the intra-actions between different entities. For example, is there a difference per se (not comparing with anything else, like a normative writing standard)? We use the artographic dimensions as a “manual” or “text” in our diffractive reading of the literacy events. We diffract with the dimensions. We comment on the agential cuts guided by two sub questions:

What performative agents appear in the literacy events?

What do these performative agents produce in the events?

Three Artographic Dimensions

Using an artographic lens led us to look for three dimensions⁵ in the design and process of the literacy events: the artistic dimension, the arts educational dimension, and the researcher-connected dimension. We study how these dimensions influence the process during the literacy event. In the following, we address the dimensions, summing up what we pay attention to in the design and in the literacy events under study.

Artistic Dimension

When an artist works, openness to exploration is a main aspect when creating something. In design of literacy activities for young children the artist’s view is connected to a relational aesthetics (Bourriaud, 2007), where the materials and tools offered invite participation. Hence, the literacy event is social and relational. The artist also provides a design with challenges, fantasy, mystery, and risky play. When Solveig asks if the children want to show her their writing, it is not directed toward specific “school learning,” which is the case with pre-phonetic writing. The focus of Solveig’s prompt is different, and the affordances to meaning making turn out differently. The artographic approach differs as writing from this perspective, within a kindergarten environment, focuses on the aesthetic perspective, using a sensuous exploration of the materials.

In using an artistic approach, the form of the language of play, the conventions of play, and the dynamics of play can be part of developing a wide-ranging literacy. For example, an

⁵ In our texts, we use dimension, lens, and view interchangeably as variations denoting the perspective we concentrate on.

artistic approach might develop cultural literacy, which enables the young writers to make new creative connections when responding to the challenges in the workshops. Through aesthetic communication, the complexity of emergent literacy becomes visible.

Arts Educational Dimension

The aesthetic approach is foregrounded through elaboration of a wide array of displays and writing tools connected to sensuous experiences: feeling, touching, smelling, seeing, hearing and listening in different variations. The aesthetic approach invites experimenting with form, enjoying the shapes, as Solveig notices the variety of writing tools in her project:

In each workshop the children make some choices before they start writing. When they start, they make choices. Children at this point make very different choices. The multisensory process, the sensuous perception includes a wide register of sensuous experiences. It is texture, structure, surface, substance, a temperature (clay, for instance, is cold). The tactile sense becomes very central. Clay has a faint smell. Lemon has a strong smell and taste. They can see while they are writing that the sign emerges. They make something actively; they have an idea regarding what the sign should look like. It is not only a multisensory process, but also a multimodal process that challenges communication with all their senses. (Transcript 4 of memory, 10.12.10)

The arts educator is attentive in listening to the children: deeply, not only verbally, but in many different ways (Jackson & Mazzei, 2008). The experiences of the children are elaborated and expanded on in a social setting, when practicing writing play. The arts educator/teacher acknowledges the energy and creativity when addressing form, rhythm, use of space, and directions. The arts educational dimension also addresses the encounter with a writing and drawing culture, as Solveig describes:

The duration varies: how long they want to write or draw. I study the aesthetics: Where does the child compose the sign on the display? Where do children start with the sign? How is the sign evolving in direction, form, rhythm? It becomes a pattern, which is not linear. Scattered images. Figures scattered over the surface. It looks like they are hovering above the surface. (Transcript 5 of memory 10.12.10)

The arts educational dimension in the workshops consists of an open invitation to create and participate. This dimension also acknowledges children as participating cultural subjects, as suggested by Guss (2017) when referring to theatre play with young children. She maintains that children have a sense of form of their own, and they have a will of their own. Following Guss (2017, p.16), children imitate, recycle, and transform elements that have made an impact and produced an imprint.

Researcher-Connected Dimension

The researcher-connected dimension is intertwined with the artist, and the arts educational dimensions. The researcher perspective is sometimes in the foreground, like in the organization and in the preparation of the workshops, including preparing materials, deciding about materials, finding solutions to the challenges of each workshop, and evaluating the degree of risk and resistance in the materials. The researcher also needs to handle logistics. The researcher, throughout the process of the intervention, needs to be attentive to what happens, make field notes and write memos in order to get hold of the material. In other words, an important research dimension is documenting as precisely and closely as possible. The researcher's lens also positively notes even small details of importance in what children do in the encounters with writing play. The analytical researcher lens contributes from the very beginning to the end. Solveig as researcher writes before the first workshop:

Last days' preparations (my to do list): to fill two treasure chests with flakes to write on (displays) and writing tools, cut up in diverse formats—animal skin, craft paper, recycled paper; test “invisible” writing; test the tools, especially the wood burning iron pen for leather/wood; borrow and load two video cameras; figure out room solutions from student classrooms to workshop spaces with stations for small children; fine grained planning of three stations for three hours, many persons who do not know each other, unpredictable how many family members will show up, all are invited. (Researcher journal entry, 11.03.11)

The Three Literacy Events as Examples

In the next section, we describe the three selected literacy events. These events are part of workshops with several writing stations and literacy events, which are described in detail elsewhere (Bendiksen, in review). We describe each event separately and make agential cuts in a process where our focus is on what different performative agents produce in the event in terms of intra-actions. This is done by first identifying some performative agents. This step is followed with the artographic dimension (also a performative agent) in mind, where we identify some of the contributions performative agents produce in terms of diffraction and difference.

The literacy events chosen include the following:

Literacy Event One: The Treasure Chests with Magic Lemon Juice and Invisible Text

Literacy Event Two: At the Blackboard around Calligraphy, Cultures, and Chinese Signs

Literacy Event Three: Writing Beside an Adult

Literacy Event One: The Treasure Chests with Magic Lemon Juice and Invisible Text

Solveig introduces two locked treasure chests, making the writing a mystery. Sitting on the floor together with the children, she opens the first chest containing different pieces of displays on skin and paper, and the second chest containing several writing tools such as feathers, markers, brushes, chalks, and so on. Among the tools, there is a fresh yellow lemon, and a piece of paper with invisible text, written in advance by Solveig. Among the inherent mysteries, which may live inside each tool and display, the chests also hide mysteries, which are disclosed by the children. The excerpt from the researcher's journal (entry 1) cited in the introduction of this article gives an initial glimpse into this literacy event. The video observation from the current literacy event is 30 minutes. We have edited a short version, which can be watched by clicking video clip 1 "Hot ironing." <https://youtu.be/JYVF0o2KC4w>

As the communication in Norwegian is silenced, we have made a translation as a piece of poetic ethnography containing sentences from the event (the voices from children in italics):

We open the treasure chests
Almost invisible, a secret text
S-O-L- I can read!
I do not see anything!
She took my place
The yellow lemon squeezed to juice
Can we drink?
No, I do not think so
Only one finger in the juice
Write with the finger
Can you notice the smell?
It tastes good, too.
Now time to conjure up the text
The lemon juice was transformed to paint

Can you feel the heat close to your hands?
The iron is dangerous, hot
Let's try to make the magic lemon signs visible
The iron maybe is not warm enough yet?
Look. This is what you have written
What does it say?
I do not know- you have written
You can tell me
JJJ!

Is it the letter J you have written?

Can I try the iron?

No, it is too hot just now

Look at the hot, visible lemon letters

This is what you have written.

The performative agents we choose to pay attention to in this event are the energy from Solveig, the group of children, the assistant filming, the treasure chests with all their content, the lemon smell and taste, the noise from the papers, the mood of expectancy, the flat iron, the place. There is an ongoing intra-action between these performative agents. Together, they produce the experiences the children get because of this literacy event.

The artistic dimensions are obvious, and what they produce through intra-actions involving Solveig, the children, the treasure chests and their contents, as well as place and time. They produce the aesthetic multisensory experiences, the thrill of opening the gifts in the treasure chests, the surprise moment, the fantasy about the secret invisible text, a sense of a magic moment.

The lemon is a performative agent in intra-action with both Solveig and the children. Solveig had forgotten to bring a knife with her in order to cut the lemon into halves. The assistant filming offers help, but she just uses her thumbs and the lemon juice starts pouring out. The resistance the lemon gives to Solveig's thumbs intensifies the tension or thrills in the children following the event closely. The children's engagement makes the moment special. Throughout the event, the children want to participate in opening the chests, feeling the materials, being able to see, and when the finger is the pen writing on an empty sheet of paper, they eagerly produce signs. This is shown in the second video clip, "Lemon Writing" <https://youtu.be/-K8tpCYORf4>

The children as performative agents make this event happen, and their response to the exploration of the magic, invisible text they produce is a knowledge-producing event, especially when the hot flat iron makes the signs become visible as some light brown 'worms' on the paper. The assistant filming involves himself in the ironing, suggesting to Solveig to turn up the heat. This makes the intensity of the ornamental signs become more visible. "What did we write?" a child asks, contributing to awareness of the idea that the brown worms are moments in the writing play that is going on now. Solveig asks, "What did you write?" A child answers "J-J-J." The intra-action produces a discovery, one of the great discoveries in emerging literacy: that there is a relationship between the written form and a letter: J. Solveig lifts up the paper and the children bang on the paper while it still is hot, and they experiment with the sound of the paper, touching it.

The teacher dimension as performative agent is already entwined in the description in the previous passage. The teacher as performative agent produces a plan and safety in the exploration of potential use of invisible text. When in advance she had prepared a paper with the invisible text “Solveig,” she also connected the invisible signs to letters that can denote a name. The teacher and the engagement of the teacher as performative agents lay bare the great discovery, that signs can refer to something (like a name). The teacher also contributes to the communication as a pedagogue, including listening, setting limits, and noticing—thus producing an acknowledging atmosphere.

The researcher dimension as performative agent produces the time and space for filming, and the video observation as performative agent is in intra-action with the choices Solveig makes as researcher and us as authors of this text. The researcher text intra-acts with theoretical perspectives and produces depth in description of the agential cut of this event, immersed in relational aesthetics as part of an emerging cultural literacy.

Literacy Event 2: At the Blackboard around Calligraphy, Cultures, and Chinese Signs

The second literacy event has a focus on calligraphy. Solveig planned this literacy event, but she participates in it only by filming the hands in writing. A teacher educator in music, Leiv, and a Chinese artist drawer, Bazou, visit the workshop. Leiv introduces calligraphy by writing his own name with chalk on the blackboard in different ways. He shows medieval text, handwritten on a display of calfskin, in parallel playing a piece of medieval music from a CD. He invites each child to write their name on the blackboard. Solveig describes this event in her researcher journal:

In the first sequence of this literacy event, Leiv, an experienced music teacher, writes his name on the blackboard with a piece of chalk. He does this in different ways: with ornaments, with a horizontally held chalk with thick letters. The children giggle when looking at the thick-letters. So he shows hand written musical notation on calfskin from the 1400s, and plays a Gregorian chant on a CD-player.



Figure 1. Lines, ornaments and numbers, where there is place.

He asks the children if they want to get up on a chair and write their names on the blackboard. Quiet, a solemn atmosphere, while one after the other comes forward and writes. Applause for everyone who finishes it. Ceremony, perhaps because they stay elevated on a chair, the hands are filmed, there is an audience, it might seem exciting? (Researcher journal, entry 2, 11.03.11)

The performative agents we concentrate on in this agential cut are the music teacher, his presence in the communication, the sound and letters from long ago, the fascination of the children, the blackboard and chalk, the chair to step on, the children's concentration, and their playwriting on the blackboard.

The music teacher as performative agent in intra-action with the other performative agents produces a seriousness and feeling of importance when the children mount the chair and write. The children might relate to the event as memorable and filled with new experiences of what writing could look like in another time, on a piece of leather. The intra-actions produce, related to the children's experiences, a wider cultural horizon connected to calligraphy and the artful writing of letters.

As a part of the literacy event concerning calligraphy, the artist-drawer Bazou writes Chinese letters and numbers on the blackboard, and after that names on a piece of paper with black ink, showing a Norwegian girl how her name is spelled with Chinese letters. This video clip number 3 "Chinese letters" can be watched here: <https://youtu.be/2AgXgpuGLbM>

Solveig writes about this in her researcher journal:

The Chinese drawer Bazou said yes when asked to demonstrate Chinese signs (brings a support person with her because of the language). She first writes at the blackboard. Then she demonstrates with a child how the Chinese letters and numbers are formed. Bazou holds her hand around the hand of a child and they write together. After a while she lets go of holding the child's hand, and the child is free to write what she wants to. She demonstrates that Chinese writing is different from how we write, and she writes the Chinese numbers 1-10 on the blackboard. The youngest children get impatient, the older ones imitate Chinese 1,2,3 on the blackboard. E.b. (4 years,10 months) discovers colored chalk, and all experiment with that. One girl notices 'soft, wet print' using a wet sponge-cloth to wipe away the writing on the blackboard. (Researcher journal, entry 3, 11.03.11)

The performative agents we focus on in this agential cut are the Chinese signs in intra-action with Bazou and the children, as well as the situation. The intra-actions involving a Norwegian girl experiencing Bazou holding her hand in writing her name with Chinese signs produce a glimpse into a world where the pupil imitates the master very concretely. This might produce a difference from what Solveig had planned, when instructing that there should be no corrections and no direct teaching of letters. This moment might also produce one extraordinary discovery concerning an aspect of linguistic awareness: that the signs are arbitrary. There is no direct connection between the sign and what it denotes (see Duan, 2012). The girl's name in Norwegian is written very different with Chinese letters, but it can still be denoted as the girl's name.

The artographer's lens in this literacy event sheds light on different aspects of calligraphy. The artist Solveig had planned for a visit from two artists for a print-historical perspective on writing as calligraphy, beautiful ornamental signs, print as art, and aesthetic expression. The artist's view invites acknowledgement of difference but also equity: the Chinese alphabet is so beautiful but different from Norwegian, Arabic, Russian, Turkish, Kurdish, Vietnamese, Somali.

The teacher's lens notices what the two guests do differently: the first inviting the children to write on the blackboard as they wish, the second showing them how to write. Both thus demonstrate cultural differences in their view of learning. In Solveig's journal entry 3 she comments on what the children do when they lose interest while looking at the handheld writing of Chinese signs: some (the older ones) try out Chinese numbers on the blackboard, some experiment with color chinks, and eventually some child invents writing with the wet sponge cloth on the blackboard.

The researcher's lens in this literacy event notices how complex the intra-actions are in this agential cut, and how the performative agents produce knowledge connected to the interculture created in the event.

Literacy Event Three: Writing Beside an Adult

In the third literacy event, the intercultural aspects of writing are discretely explored because the parents of the children are invited to sit beside their child alongside other pairs and write in the way that text is produced in the culture the family comes from. There are several parents joining in. The parent is instructed not to try to correct the child's writing. There is one Turkish mother with her son (3.5 years old). She looks at the form the child is occupied with. So, she writes 'properly' on his paper. But, the child has a will of his own and continues to fill out his form with black marker (Figure 2).

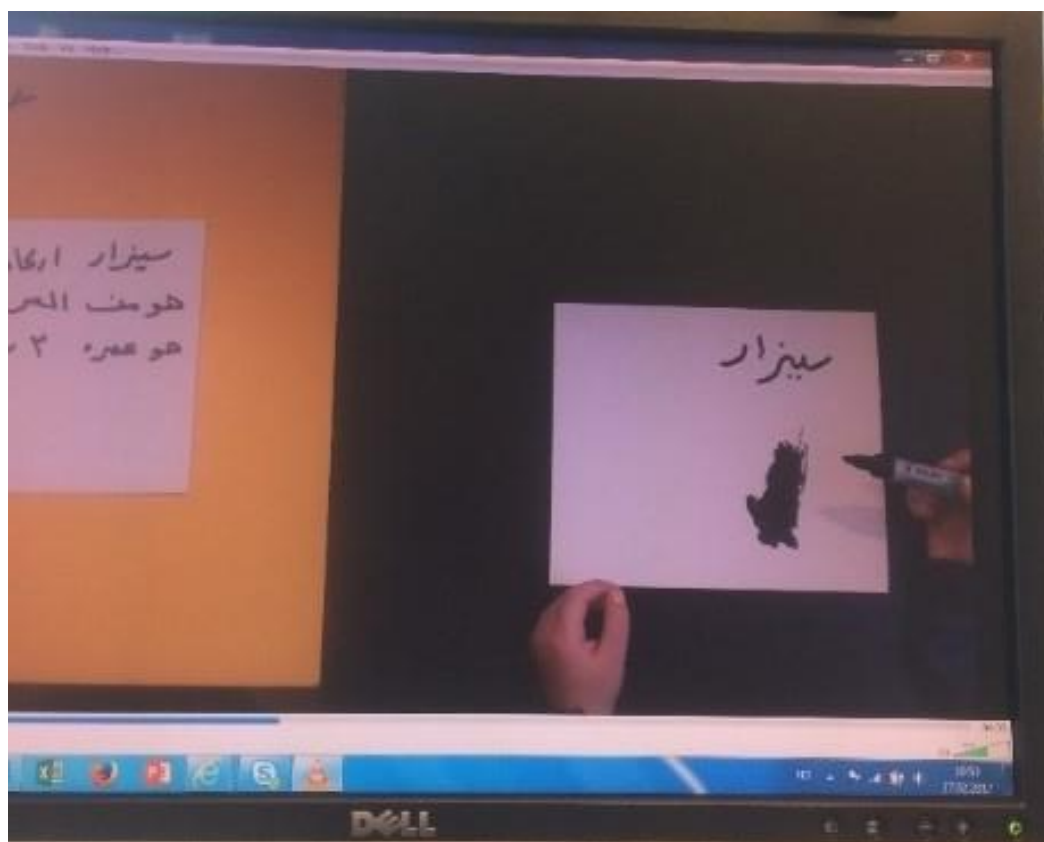


Figure 2. Kurdish mother shows how the name 'should be written', but the very young child writes in his own way.

A Norwegian father beside his son draws a Donald Duck and says that he will spend time on writing when he is with his son, but not now. The first of these two episodes might produce an experience that writing properly is important, while the other episode might produce a feeling that writing is not important, but instead being with the child in a playful mode. In this literacy

event we, however, focus our analysis on two other episodes as agential cuts: one with a Vietnamese mother and her child, the other a Kurdish mother and her child. Solveig writes in her researcher journal about the episode with the Vietnamese mother and her four-year-old child:

The four-year-old girl and her Vietnamese mother are sitting side by side in front of two low tables on two small chairs in the small room, transformed from a doll playroom to a workshop by me earlier today. This is the second pilot workshop, and I meet the girl for the second time and her mother for the first. Yes, she has read the project info, and of course she allows the daughter to submit to the writing workshops, and it is ok with her that I video film their hands while they are writing now. Both have just chosen paper among four different qualities and sizes, and they have made choices among the writing tools: a black marker with a round tip, brushes in two different sizes (all with round tips), pencils and ink and charcoals. I climb up on the small chair behind and above them, and start to zoom in their hands, their writing displays and their writing tool. (Researcher journal, entry 5, 18.11.10)

The video-observation, video clip 4, “Vietnamese mother and child writing together” <https://youtu.be/jrpDLG7B0qU> is transcribed by the researcher Solveig with use of the artist’s and art teacher’s lens:

The girl chooses a brush and dips it into the glass of ink, and starts writing, looking at the mother’s writing now and then. In the beginning she writes very carefully with light and tender strokes from left to right, the letter E (not a letter in her first name). She writes the letters A, I ... she discovers that the ink inside the round brush escapes and goes down inside the letters written on the paper. After the easy E she refills the brush, because the mother suggests she does so. Then she begins to brush like a professional calligrapher on the second line of the sheet. The hesitation from the first line is replaced by a remarkable determination, helped by the refilled brush, which releases the ink as she decides on the pressure. She holds the brush in an easy tweezer grip with 2-3 fingers from the middle of the brush. First, she composes the U sign in one movement, then she lightens the grip and makes the -, then one small vertical stroke at both sides of the horizontal stroke, before she starts to write the next vertical stroke where the brush stops.

The U-sign seems not to be a copy or an inspiration from one of her mother’s writing signs, it seems to be her own unique and never-before-seen-sign. She writes more together with her mother, I can see it through the lens of the video camera, and I think, while I stand above her filming, that I now have been a witness to a four-year-old child’s magic sign-making. (Researcher journal, entry 6, 18.11.10)

In the second video observation sequence, a Kurdish mother and her child (4 years old) are writing beside each other. The mother writes beautiful Arabic signs from right to left in lines. The child writes from the middle of the paper. She glances quickly at her mother's writing every now and then. This sequence, videoclip 5, "Kurdish mother and child writing together" <https://youtu.be/6FPs2ocIE0g> shows that the child is picking up forms from the mother's writing in Arabic and includes ideas from her mother in the pattern she produces with rhythmic writing of round forms, small lines, and dots. Her way of writing goes in different directions. She continues with her lines and dots where there is a space free. She observes the dots the mother produces. First, she turns a part of the paper on the other side and tries out a black dot, and then transforms the dots into a long vertical line of dots on the right side of the paper. When asked if she is ready, she says no. The child continues to write on her paper until it is full. She then rounds off her writing with a hybrid letter formation under the rounding where she started.

The performative agents we identify are the parent, the child, the writing situation, the proximity, and the writing tools, especially the ink and the soft brush in the first episode. The performative agents produce a moment of togetherness around the writing cultures. The relational aesthetics produced also bring to the forefront an acknowledging atmosphere, an interculture, where the different adult-child pairs are acknowledged with equal, but different, value.

The artist dimension has in the first place produced this event, seeing the potential for meaning making in exploration of writing play. Solveig's detailed description of what the child does when using the soft pencil brush and producing magic signs produces a difference per se (namely, the attention to fine details) through the artist informed lens intra-acting with the writing tools.

The teacher dimension produces the acknowledging atmosphere in staging an intercultural encounter. The interlinked teacher-researcher dimension finds the solution in placing the pairs aside and documenting the event with a video observation so that the fine-grained details of the writing event can be described and given value; thus, making it possible to notice the huge potential of discovery in such literacy events.

Summing Up the Findings in the Analysis

To examine our research inquiry, we have considered each of the literacy events as an agential cut. The relationality, the elusiveness, and the fluidity of each event has been made visible in ways which, according to Burnett and Merchant (2018), justify a description of the literacy events as literacy-as-event. In our analysis, we have made the diffractions with use of the artographer's dimensions as lens. We have identified and paid attention to performative agents

in each agential cut. The focus has been on what the performative agents produce in a certain cut. The produced meaning is visible through the diffractions.

The meaning making produced in each event exposes the consequences of not going straight ahead toward taming of the literacy activity toward school writing, but instead being interested in children's ways of writing in playful ways. The acknowledging atmosphere, the serious engagement, the feeling of importance, the sensuous, aesthetic experimentation with materials have all also produced a depth in the analysis and the ways we read the events with theory. One critical reflexive comment is: The children are invited to these literacy events, but the frames are very set by the adult. It seems that this is fine for the children. It is also an ethical responsibility for the adults to safeguard the situations, like mentioning that the flat iron is hot, and to prepare the treasure chests with necessary material for the experimentations.

We have chosen three events where adults are in intra-actions with the children in the experimentation with writing play. The artographer's three entangled positions have produced knowledge regarding the importance of the adults' participation when acknowledging the values in cultural literacy, both with a print historical perspective regarding artful writing in Literacy Event Two and the interculture around writing created in Literacy Event Three.

Folding Back the Layers

Young children's writing play can be seen as multimodal, drawing on Kress's notion of multimodality (Kress, 1997). In this article, the concept of a literacy practice is situated within a wider landscape of multimodal communication, including drawing, talking and gesture, smell, taste, listening to music, and addressing materiality of different kinds.

The aesthetic approach in this project is also performative, which means that it emanates from practice, and the practice produces new knowledge (Gergen & Gergen, 2018; Haseman, 2006; Schechner, 2013). The practice informing this article can be Solveig's previous experiences as a visual artist, made visible in the aesthetic approach in the design of the workshops. The practice informing the design can also be Solveig's questioning of the scarce focus on aesthetic potential in the ways young children in kindergarten settings in Norway encounter emerging literacy. The children are acknowledged as full participants, and their experimenting with displays and writing tools is also acknowledged. There is no wish to make the children "mainstream," infusing a certain "normality." The intercultural encounters with writing play are to support recognition of difference as a cultural value. When applying such an approach the social ethos is strong, as is the wish to contribute to the world in inclusive, sustainable, ethical ways, honoring an aesthetics of difference (not sameness).

With the artographic lens in the analysis, we have folded back some layers in young sign makers' exploration in three writing play literacy events. We have been informed and touched by the energy in the intra-actions related to human agents, and to the materiality of the writing play. We have been surprised by the qualities the performative agents produce, and we have been enlightened by the rich affordances in these literacy events: shocked because, with no special attention to the writing play, these moments of discovery might have passed unnoticed. The research material and the moments we have described have enabled new understandings in us, as authors of this article. The insights gleaned from this study have opened up new questions regarding what an aesthetic multimodal approach to literacy might produce connected to the potential for experiences of emerging cultural literacy.

This is the main knowledge contribution of this sub-study: to make the importance of an aesthetic approach to writing play visible. The discoveries the children have made connect to linguistic awareness regarding the arbitrariness of the signs, as well as to the connection between letter and meaning. These aspects are of decisive importance for becoming literate. However, even more, the aesthetic and intercultural experiences in the writing play workshops seem to make the children able to acknowledge difference, also to read the context, and thus become culturally literate in the context of emergent literacy.

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Youtube links for the video clips in the article:

Video clip 1: “Hot Ironing” <https://youtu.be/JYVF0o2KC4w>

Video clip 2: “Lemon Writing” <https://youtu.be/-K8tpCYORf4>

Video clip 3: “Chinese letters” <https://youtu.be/2AgXgpuGLbM>

Video clip 4: “Vietnamese mother and child writing together” <https://youtu.be/jrpDLG7B0qU>

Video clip 5: “Kurdish mother and child writing together” <https://youtu.be/6FPs2ocIE0g>

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International Journal of Education & the Arts

<http://IJEa.org>

ISSN: 1529-8094

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