Light Narratives: A light adventure in an atelier-inspired environment

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ABSTRACT

This paper reports on a project that revolved around the creative versatility of students across age groups, from nursery (2 years old) to Year 10 (15 years old) and across two schools. The early years children created light installations and the middle and senior years used these installations as inspiration for creative writing. The processes and dialogues created when an old flexi tube was presented to students are explored leaving all possibilities open to the children’s imaginations. The potential benefits for middle years teachers will be discussed.

Introduction

This article shares the processes, and products that were created when an old flexi tube was presented to children leaving all possibilities open to be explored. When imagination allows us to leap into infinite possibilities, an open-ended experience begins. Kieran Egan (2018) has conceptualised the imagination as the connection point for perception, memory, idea generation, emotion and metaphor in what Margaret Boden (2004, p. 6) names ‘conceptual space’.

Imagination allows us to go further afield; opening a door to the apparently impossible which becomes achievable at each step. This is because when seen by one individual and then shared, it is furthered by many who contribute in shedding light through different perspectives.

Carl Sagan (Sagan & Druyan, 2011) saw imagination as the means to take us to places that haven’t yet been invented. While Paisley Livingston (2009) believes creativity is the ability to consider what is formed, focusing on certain aspects rather than others in relation to what is being created and why. The imaginative research journey being reported draws on these views of creativity and imagination.

The setting for the research project was an atelier-inspired environment, which was created and kindled by the Reggio Emilia educational approach. This approach welcomes a multitude of expressional processes where the concept that wants to emerge is the uniqueness and imaginative processes that individuals can bring onto a collaborative project, which flows and grows towards a common destination. Vea Vecchi, (2010 p. 2) describes the atelier as an environment where projects emerge through action. They are ‘places where brains, hands, sensibilities, rationality, emotion and imagination all work together in close cooperation’.

The atelier-inspired environment

The Reggio Emilia educational approach created the atelier, or workshop, where children and an artist come together creating narratives of the possible through the ideas and experiences of children. Loris Malaguzzi, creator of the approach, coined the expression *The hundred languages of children* (Filippini & Vecchi, 1996) with the intent to illustrate the numerous languages or processes that exist in children’s minds.

The atelier provides a large selection of materials from traditional mar- making tools, to recycled materials. Together with language, oral and written, sound and movement, they document and
Inspire the work done to enhance, record and provide constant questions and answers that create the learning journey. The atelierista follows and feeds the discussions and questions the students’ theories in order to expose them to new visions and interpretations. The environment stimulates thought and connections to diverse dialogues. Talking about environments, Vea Vecchi (Filippini & Vecchi, 1996) believes that the continuous connections between the mind and the environment, which create complex, thought patterns, must be considered when creating learning contexts. The environment must propose and promote interdisciplinary ways of thinking. I would argue that these connections and probing complex thinking are essential for 21st century learners.

![Figure 1. An atelier-inspired environment.](image)

The processes

The creative adventure started when an old flexi light tube was proposed as a narrative initiator in an atelier-inspired environment. Small groups of students worked collaboratively towards a large-scale installation.

The students experienced the atelier once a week for approximately 30 mins per session (aged between 2 to 6 years old for a total of 190 students) and worked together sharing ideas and potential concepts that formed along the way. Each year group worked synergistically to define a common and shared vision. The different age groups were exposed only to their own project and saw the coming together of the other projects, 4 in total, only at the exhibition. This created expectancy and awe in experiencing how a material, the light tube, can lead to very different narratives. The first phase comprised children who were regularly exposed to an atelier-inspired environment while in the second phase, only a very small group of children had previous experience. One material created many visions. Small groups of students worked collaboratively towards a large-scale installation.

The tube was laid on the mat area. As the students arrived, questions jumped around. The tube was experimented with to see its potential. Surprise and excitement generated a discussion on what could be done with the light.

Each year group came up with different proposals that were shared with all the subgroups in their class year. Ideas were further discussed and additional material proposed. The students chose loose parts such as buttons, beads, fabric, tins and packaging material according to their vision after exploring how these materials could add meaning to their artwork.

In the first phase, they started working on their ideas and how to make them visible. As each group worked on the shared piece, they enjoyed seeing the progress and the freedom of interpretation that each student brought adding new possibilities and narratives.
During the second phase, when the project was moved from ideation to production, all groups were happy to either continue or change the theme of the narrative they had worked on previously. Their choice was made on their concept of closest rendering of the theme they had chosen. As the project evolved, the children saw the light as the outline of a narrative and suggested they add material that would specify the nature of the single projects in detail.

As the atelierista, I documented the unfolding of the project and related to each group what the previous group within their age group was working on, liaising on the discourses that were made. This took the format of a written journal that was read out to them.

As Jerome Bruner (Vecchi & Bruner, 2011) argues, humans are so highly committed to pursuit of the possible that they search and research possibilities that drive them to different levels of consciousness. The atelierista facilitates and encourages the students to think holistically where a possibility leads to many more eye-opening and ‘mind-expanding’ scenarios. Bruner (Vecchi & Bruner, 2011) goes on to underline the need to start early in order to deepen knowledge and embed it in the fertile ground of infancy.

The students in this project came together demonstrating how age, curiosity, knowledge, courage, imagination, intuition, and problem solving can produce different visions of the same material.

**Imagining possibilities**

The phrase, ‘one material many visions’, allows research, experimentation, development and production of a set of possible and open-ended narratives. A single initial possibility, the old flexi light that apparently was at the end of its life, experienced new beginnings. John Berger’s (BBC, 1983) comment, ‘stories begin at their end’ still holds strong where one narrative ends in order to act as a trampoline for new experiences. The great orator and statesman Demosthenes believed that small opportunities are often the beginning of great enterprises. In this case, the possibilities granted to the old light were those of potential new beginnings that apparently were not yet seen. Here the power of imagination was fundamental. The vision of a beginning was set where extended possibilities were seen through the eyes of many. This became the centre of the project.

In education, allowing possibilities to emerge might open windows of opportunity where these are not immediately sensed. David Perkins (1981) is a firm believer that creativity concerns what you do with your abilities or characteristics.

The possibility given to the students was that of imagining possibilities, an open experience where the main ingredient was imagination where there was no preconceived right or wrong. There were limitations on safety and the element of light was the leading theme, but the journey was open.

By combining possibility and imagination, a quantum leap can be made towards unrevealed creations that initiate in the mind and come alive in the making. Ewing (2010) states that all artforms are disciplines with distinctive knowledges, skills and understandings and are different ways of making and representing meaning – different kinds of literacies. Howard Gardner describes the wonder of learning as an intuitive journey that embraces direct experience in building knowledge with the help of peers.

Believing is succeeding. Allowing is creating. Making is understanding. Ask a child and he/she will naturally and spontaneously answer. Creativity whispers solutions that we are unaware of.

**Findings**

In the projects below the children had experienced the atelier environment over time. They questioned, experimented, explored and created narratives on a regular basis. Their ideas were welcomed and worked on collaboratively at all times. All experiences were part of a journey that took unexpected turns and surprising bends revealing new scenarios. The titles were chosen to illustrate the different branches of Science that were touched upon.
Phase one

**Light narratives in urban engineering**

The children immediately saw the flexi tube as an interesting object. Looking at the light tube and noticing that it was long and wavy, they started running their fingers along it. As the atelierista played with the light effects moving from static to twinkle and then slow-glow the students commented on the light flow and how it was ‘as fast as a fast car.’ They then asked for their favourite toy, cars. It immediately clicked that it was a road. So off went the wrooms and zooms and crash! They used all the materials they were accustomed to such as tins, cardboard, packaging materials and tubes to create a city.

Here are some of their comments as the project unfolded.

‘Vroom beep, crash move away.’

‘We need to give them a road in the sky so that they can go far’.

‘Follow the lights home as it is far’.

![Figure 2. Light narratives in urban engineering.](image)

**Light narratives in Natural Science**

Experimenting with the potential expression of the light tube took a while and it went through phases of quiet observation, testing of flexibility and physical imitation of the light effects to land on the common idea of a caterpillar, which actually was renamed CAMOBILLAR, a hairy, attentive athletic creature that wears fashionable items. The caterpillar idea emerged from the flexibility of the tube and the noticeable light effects that ‘look like the lights are walking and running.’ It was decided amongst the students that the ‘camobillar’ needed shoes and they graciously lent it theirs.

The unfurling of this narrative was also influenced by the classic story of *The very hungry caterpillar*, (Carle, 2007) which is part of the curriculum in the literacy program.

Here are some comments as the project unfolded.

‘The lights look like a Camobillar? No! It’s called a CATERPILLAR in English.’

‘It can’t walk without shoes. We can give it ours.’

They wanted ‘real’ shoes so the idea of taking a picture of their shoes was voted.
Light narratives in meteorology
The light tube was explored in all its length and their immediate response was that it was as vast as the sky and the lights were like stars. The stars then led to rain. Materials were chosen to create the wet effect and while selecting them, the question of rain colour surfaced. As the children chose beads and buttons of rain colour, which was quite open to interpretation, a student stated that they were making ‘Ridiculous Rain’ as ‘it only rains dark blue at night.’ Another child said that ‘rain changes colour when it falls down and it turns into the rainbow.’

Light narratives in Neuroscience
The lights became a significant concept in the theme ‘the brain’, which had arisen in the atelier and was greatly discussed with passion, enthusiasm and insight. It became a process of detailed inquiry. The students noticed that the lights could explain the functions of the brain as their flow changed. Three light effects became important in their interpretation of what happens when the brain ‘thinks.’ The brain was the set in a scenario of thought connections seen as lines and circles.

Here is what emerged.
‘When the lights flash, it is when you have an idea’.  
‘When they flow, you are thinking’.  
‘When they go on and off quickly the brain is confused. It happens a little at school’.  
‘When they are off the brain is sleeping but it wakes up when you dream’.

Figure 5. Light narratives in Neuroscience.

Phase two

This phase of the project involved students that were completely new to the experience of the atelier, only a minority had experienced it in the past. The first few sessions were spent introducing this new and challenging concept of generating ideas through inquiry based on personal and shared experiences.

A selection of recycled materials was collected and presented to the students. Exploration of the possible uses other than the most immediate were discussed. The initial impact was challenging but soon the children found scope and enjoyment in drawing out their imaginative drive and experimented extensively with the materials which were very similar to the ones in phase one with the addition of fabric and ribbons. Surprised and enthralled by the somewhat unusual perspective proposed, each group brought the experience a step further by sharing ideas, concepts and personal thoughts to the installations that were slowly becoming visible constructions of their creativity. As the groups saw their class’s work they were in awe and enthusiastic about contributing to the piece. Furthermore, the work of the other classes, which was on display at the same time, produced a wave of enthusiastic questioning and praise.

Light narratives in Graphic Design

The children saw the string of lights as a ‘rope’, like the ones we see at Christmas although Christmas was over, their minds wandered towards it. They expressed their scepticism in seeing it differently.

‘It is difficult to make a string of lights into a … picture! It is not like a pencil it looks like a scribble!’  
This vision was enthusiastically accepted and … let the scribble perform.

‘Yes, it is a scribble and it will turn into a picture when it is big’.
As with the previous class, the children found it difficult to see beyond the simplicity of the ‘fat Christmas lights’. When introduced to the possibility that the lights could flow inside the tube, new possibilities arose. Moving like the lights, they saw, created a narrative that was expressed kinaesthetically. Something was moving further and the children talked about the use of light and how its opposite was ‘the dark’. The dark sparked discussions on emotions and metaphors. ‘As dark as rain, as dark as the inside of a flower, as dark as space, as dark as the cinema.’ Light brought solace, ‘light is what stops you from being scared.’ ‘It is a gold liquid and … then they put it together in a lamp to make it shine’.

It was decided that the flow of lights could also have a voice. We moved and explored euphony and dissonance until someone said that we looked like animals. ‘We are animals because they don’t really
talk'. A discussion arose on the animal that makes the ‘best’ noise and the lion was voted. Another important factor was ‘A lion is strong and its teeth shine ... like fire’. Light had been seen as fire to some students.

Lion teeth and eyes were researched, as the best results were needed to express the lion’s full beauty and strength.

The exhibition

The students’ work came together in the annual art exhibition. The installations were exhibited as they were seen in the students’ minds, alive and full of expression. It was staged for the viewer/audience to step inside the students’ imagination so that a structure was created in order to draw the audience into the child’s mind. The experience was enveloped in sound where a soundtrack was created to further enhance the journey into light and imagination.

In the second project, the concept that strongly emerged was the need and ability to see through multi-perspectives. One material, many visions, multi-perspectives.

Figure 8. Step inside
Sharing the project with the middle and senior years

Students from the middle and senior years came to see the exhibition and they were in awe. They expressed their delight and surprise in the younger students’ ability to see beyond conventions creating scenarios that brought the viewer into a dimension of imagination and fantasy that they seemed to have left behind.

The most used word by the students was *amazing*. Other words that emerged were unexpected, creative, different, moving, special, unique, floating into space, imagination and inspirational.
One student commented that it made him think of a relaxing place that takes away all of your problems. Another student saw the project as a way of showing multi-perspectives and worked his way round it in order to explore different visions.

Many students commented that they recalled their early years when we could use our mind creatively and our imagination is wild. Children are so imaginative and free to express their ideas in many ways.

The teachers encouraged the students to use the installation for further thoughts and considerations. They were surprised and inspired too.

**Student creative writing on light narratives**

Below are two imaginative pieces from middle years and senior students:

**Afterlife by Angelo Sodo**

The residence of all the spirits. All the souls who have suffered in their life finally meet peace here. All the worries and anxieties slowly perish. The souls of the many are lulled just like a newborn, like strangers to the world.

This world is not contaminated by human impurities.

Ribbons of light entwine and carry the souls. The arrogant presence of white seems to play a tune. And to this, the souls dance, led by the silky harmony of the music. Everything is perennially in place. Every soul, different to any other, has reached nirvana. Each personality has finally conquered their state of peace, which intersects another, forming a mosaic of perfectly fitting spirits, all in motion. Each of these is unique and represented by something that has marked their life. Yet this appearance is invisible and perceivable exclusively as an aroma. It is not a smell, more like a sensation, which few people can grasp. Who will be able to feel it, empathise with the feeling and have access to a story which every soul possesses one different to another?

By observing the complete picture of it, all the different aromas mix, creating which cannot be illustrated by modest means such as words. Unfortunately, no one will ever have the possibility to feel the sensation. Except one. One person, or entity, or idea, however it shall be defined, which will enjoy the peak of his creation, a work of art to which all the most genuine souls participate. Souls who have given their everything, who have always accepted the eruption of difficulties in their lives and fought them. The souls of people who tackled life in the right way and always tried to redeem their mistakes. Souls struck by tragedies, suffering without any fault, can now rest. He has stretched his hand out to them and brought them with him. All the worthy spirits of the world can hang on to his arm and receive their key to eternity.

**Light Narrative by Matteo Moracchioli**

I entered the room and immediately shades and tones of many different colours enchanted my eyes. A melody of alternate blushes, from dark green to light blue, from rose to pale orange; they danced in the room, carried by intermittent lights that shone all over the art piece.

On the left-hand side of the creations were depictions, hanging in what seemed a methodical disorder. These all left trails of colour, whose hues varied gently, pleasing the view. Concentrating on the lights, you could notice that the glow flowed in a certain direction; it seemed that the more you looked at it, the more energy it seemed to acquire. The artists have given energy to the crayon just like the light has, giving it freedom of speech and the ability to jot pure drawings and words. The light resembled the energy with which one uses a pen to be able to give life to new combinations of words.

On the right side, the figure of a lonely lion could be perceived. An animal who can show its greatness only when free; yet, this creation seemed to have trapped it, still, inside a cage. The light though, shining inside him, connote to a strong sense of rebellion. The light shouted: ‘I want to break free!’ and in my head, the lion did. This idea was so strong that I could not let him remain trapped for much longer, and when he managed to tear loose the chains of capture, a powerful ray of energy and light flashed through...
my body, giving me shivers. Even though there was no sound, I could perceive the clatter of freedom bouncing between my ears.

The moment I exit the room, I feel different. The creation has given me a huge amount of new energy that made me feel free, just like the lion.

I interviewed two teachers about the event. One said, ‘the students were mesmerised by the installation and the tranquillity, which it evoked in them, enabled their ideas and creativity to flow on to the page in a way that I had not previously seen’. While the other teacher commented that, ‘stepping into the Light’ narrative installation felt like being blown away by what the lower school children were able to create when given the tools to do so’. Neither my class nor I had seen anything like it before. It was an excellent example of what our youngest students are truly capable of. My Year 8 class were lost for words when they first entered, and it was wonderful watching them explore the artwork and begin to develop their own interpretations of it. One student said it was like peering into the mind of a child and seeing an imagination that is free, before school, society and environment begin to influence and organise their thoughts. As a result, they were inspired to write some of their best and most interesting work.

Implications

Creativity and imagination are vital 21st century skills for people of all ages. That is why it was somewhat concerning that some of the older children in the project appeared to assign fertile imaginations solely to their early years with comments such recalling a time when we could use our mind creatively and our imagination is wild. While art installations can inspire a large community of students in the middle and senior years to look at young minds with awe and reverence, they must also recognise the power of their own imaginations as they age. It is essential that teachers and students of all ages exercise their own and their students’ imaginations and that the process is valued.

The project described above demonstrates the important connections that can be made between Science and storytelling. In a study by Banister and Ryan (2001), for example, children remembered abstract Science ideas more effectively when taught in a story format. Remembering isolated and disconnected facts and concepts is more difficult than recalling this type of content in a story because the information is presented in a coherent and connected way.

As well, and more than ever before, there is a need to weave subjects into a fabric of interdisciplinary practices where subjects that might not necessarily seem connected come together (Needle et al., 2007). In addition, Light Narratives demonstrates the importance of social interaction and collaboration; the ways that young learners and older students can inspire one other and share their achievements creating a fabric of knowledge across ages and across the curriculum.

Working across ages sets the ground for the collaboration of teachers as well as students across their school and between teachers across schools with individuals who come from very different backgrounds, beliefs and experiences. One material can create many visions.

Conclusion

Light narratives was an educational journey of wonder from nursery to the senior years. The use of light was investigated, experimented, discussed and created dialogues with all parts. Imagination and creativity inspired each phase and went on to generate the concept of multiple perspectives. Light narratives produced creative writing in the middle and senior years, spurring imagination.

It was an experience for all – students, teachers and parents who were invited to step inside the vast repertoire of narratives that a simple object created. The installations acted as a platform of opportunity for thought-provoking creative pieces. Young and older students’ resources converged and created further narratives opening new and unusual perspectives. The audience was captured
by the experience of stepping inside imagination and looking at multi-perspectives, as they had not experienced before.

The Reggio Emilia educational approach is making leaps and bounds in demonstrating the true and surprising multi talents of young students. The insight of the *hundred languages of children* has spread throughout the world. There is a need for recognition of ability in children and a further need to use Art as a way of demonstrating the incredible creative potential of children and a platform of opportunities. (Warren, 2018)

This approach to learning and knowledge can be seen as the philosophy described by Adam Ferner (Ferner, 2018, p. 132), ‘to be constantly questioning your position and testing out different perspectives’. The mind is truly magnificent!

References


**Holly Warren** currently works as an atelierista in an International school in Milan, Italy and holds an Honours degree in Fine Art from the University of Hertfordshire. Holly does research in Visual Arts, Creativity, Teacher Education and Primary Education. Holly is inspired by Loris Malaguzzi, striving to empower children’s creativity in the early years and celebrating their ancestral creative drive. She coordinates and curates art exhibitions held at the school.