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## The Accordion Book Project: Reflections on Learning and Teaching

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### Abstract

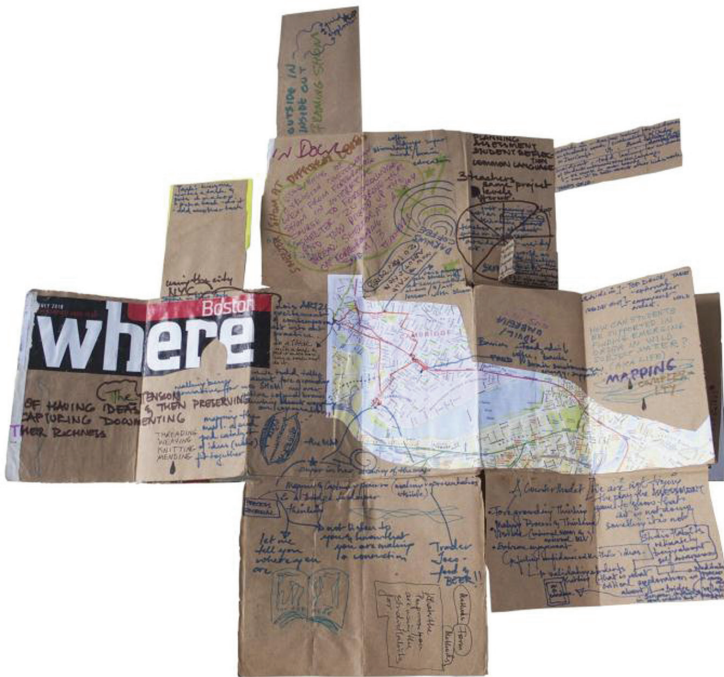
This chapter outlines the overarching ideas of the Accordion Book Project, an ongoing effort by Arzu Mistry and Todd Elkin to develop art-centered, transdisciplinary methods for teacher and student **practice, inquiry, and reflection**. The processes outlined stem from a core belief in supporting the development of agency in young people and teachers so they can become proactive drivers of their own practice (learning and art). The methods co-developed here bridge education and contemporary art practice. This chapter shares pictures of practice and a supporting educational philosophy involving the use of an accordion book as a hybrid of sketchbook, journal, field notebook, map and work of visual/conceptual art. The practices outlined here focus on: Developing a *responsiveness to the world* through ‘deep noticing’, capturing how ‘things talk to you,’ developing an *ongoing practice* using structures and strategies to support cycles of inquiry and action and modeling the use of accordion books as *sites of captured reflection*, revisiting previously documented ideas, coding them and triggering new explorations.

**Keywords:** Artistic practice, Teacher and student agency, Creative inquiry, Accordion books, Teacher inquiry.

### 6.1 Background

The practice of using handmade accordion books as a constructivist site for reflection, inquiry and praxis is something that we (Elkin and Mistry) chanced upon one summer at a professional development institute for teachers.

We had come together from our separate continents to co-teach at the institute and were eager to jump into dialogue. On the day before the institute started we were feeling especially inspired and full of ideas and wanted to capture and document our excitement at being in the moment of learning: The anticipation, the discomfort of the unknown, neurons firing with multiple inquiries and being in a synergistic environment where we were excited about the content being shared with us. In a moment of “necessity being the mother of invention”, we grabbed what we had in front of us, a brown paper bag from a grocery store and began visually mapping, in words and in images, the twists and turns of the dialogue we had been having while walking that morning. At some point, we collaged an actual map of the area onto the brown paper because we wanted to annotate it with the exact locations and contexts where the ideas we were having had emerged. Later, we folded the bag back and forth into an accordion structure and this became the first of many accordion books we have since made together and separately (Figure 6.1). For the next five days we both kept adding to this base



**Figure 6.1** Mistry and Elkin’s first collaborative accordion book.

conversation in a variety of non-linear ways. There was an energy and excitement in this visual form of capturing, sorting, ideating and seeing ideas for emerging inquiries and experiments.

While others at that summer's institute captured content by taking notes on ruled pads or on their electronic devices, we were drawing, making symbols, capturing words, passing the book back and forth to identify connections, contradictions and questions and processing our learning in a completely different way. As artists and arts educators we were already accustomed to making meaning in ways that were non-linear and layered so this process came naturally to us. This first accordion book was a captured and built-upon constructivist dialogue between the two of us and served as a model for many of our evolving ideas about the potential for different kinds of exchange in teaching, learning and contemporary art practice. In addition, that first collaborative accordion book became a tremendously powerful artifact for us, an embodiment of the excited processing and learning we were doing that summer. It contained the DNA of so much of the teaching and learning we would do in the years that followed, both in terms of process and content. In subsequent years it became important for us to continue using inexpensive brown kraft paper for our accordion books, for two primary reasons: First, we liked that kraft paper is accessible and inexpensive. Second, we liked that the brown paper did not feel precious, giving us the freedom to capture uncertainty, false starts and confusion and to be messy if we wanted. Formally, using the brown paper gave us permission not to chase "good", because "as long as you stick to good you'll never have real growth" (Bruce Mao). We encourage others to use kraft paper too for these same reasons.

After that summer, we began together and separately to share this process of meaning making using accordion books with other teachers and youth both in our individual teaching contexts and in workshops we taught together across the U.S. We began to guide others through the emergent process of capturing what speaks to them and using that as an anchor to develop and pursue their individual inquiries. We also shared different ways of coding information and other visual and organizational strategies we had found useful in our own accordion book practice.

Very quickly, we found that many of the teachers we shared the process with eagerly took to it and after five years of sharing these accordion book forms and methods with others we began to hear from people far and wide, some were former students, some had taken a workshop with us and others had copied one of our handouts second hand without ever meeting us. We heard from people across the globe, from Washington DC, to Spain, to

Singapore and many other locations. Many of them said variants of, “I’ve used this with my students and I love it.” and/or “I’ve taken your ideas and made them my own.” This sharing of strategies with other teachers and youth and then learning from the ways they have taken the form and adapted it to suit their own individual purposes and inquiries has become a central part of our own teaching, learning and inquiry. We began to feel strongly that there was something here. Why did teachers and students take to this? What did this practice have to offer, particularly with relationship to active learning? These have become driving questions for us. This chapter explores these and other questions and begins to present some of our findings.

The processing of learning is messy. There is emotion, absorbing and processing information, confusion, connections being made, digressions and reflection all often happening simultaneously. We found that it was possible to capture this embodied and whole experience of learning in our accordion books. Others have found their own very personal reasons to develop an ongoing accordion book practice.

## **6.2 A Proposition**

The work we are presenting in this chapter is based on our core belief in supporting the development of agency in young people and teachers so that they can become proactive drivers of their own practices of learning, art making and any other transdisciplinary inquiries they are pursuing.

Agency consists of feeling empowered to take charge of one’s own learning, giving one’s self permission to be alert, to notice and inquire, and inquire about the world around us and within ourselves and act and reflect upon our actions.

Agency here is linked to personal and relational motivation to pursue learning and sits separate from a compliance based model of schooling (Calvert 2016) Although most learners, both teachers and students, exist within a structure of schooling, can their individual agency empower them to advocate for their best potential for learning? Agency has typically been positioned in counterpoint to structure. Below we detail further our notions of agency in relation to David Perkin’s proactive learner (2009), Olivia Gude’s artist in a democratic society (2009) and Emirbayer’s and Mische’s temporal and relational model of agency (1998). The process of using accordion books has helped us, our teachers and students find and grow this seed of proactive agency and develop pathways to an active practice of learning, doing and reflecting.

### 6.3 Research Questions

Our research questions have emerged from many years of deep engagement in accordion book practice. Our collaborative development of accordion book forms, methods and purposes, our individual accordion book practices and our work sharing these processes with teachers, artists and young people have led to several overarching questions. These questions drive our inquiry:

In what ways does Accordion Book Practice build teacher and learner agency?

What kinds of learning and thinking does Accordion Book practice support and make possible?

How have teachers and students taken Accordion Book Practice and made it their own and what can we learn from this?

How can Accordion Book Practice scaffold the cycle of Inquiry, Reflection and Practice?

In what ways are active Accordion Book Practice and Contemporary Art Practice interrelated?

### 6.4 What Is Accordion Book Practice?

Our use of accordion books **for capturing, visualizing, and building upon reflective thinking** emerges from a long lineage of hand crafted bookmaking. These many book-like forms include illuminated texts, codices, illustrated field notebooks, artists' books, sketchbooks, journals, and fanzines. We hold these many antecedents close to us and are inspired by them.

The accordion books and processes we have developed have some specific qualities: They are a self-created, self-initiated aesthetic space. Very simply, they are handmade, zigzag-folded paper (often inexpensive brown kraft paper) containing drawings, writing, collage; art ephemera either made or collected, color codes, visual metaphors, flaps extending vertically off of the top and bottom and within the book and pockets containing additional written, printed, collected or drawn pages (Figure 6.2). We have found that this simple structure allows for a great deal of flexibility and lends itself to circular, non-linear, and divergent/emergent thinking. These eye catching handmade books are a site for capturing observations, insights and fleeting thoughts, revisiting and building upon ideas, making connections between seemingly unconnected elements and arriving at new and unexpected visual and conceptual places, only to begin again, picking up threads in often non-linear ways. Accordion book practice makes noticing, thinking, learning and curiosity visible.



**Figure 6.2** Form and structure.

Accordion Book process comes from a philosophy of learner-centered practice, where the learner (be they teacher, parent or student) is directing their own inquiries and as a result, their own learning. Accordion book strategies shared by us or adapted by students and teachers encourage the maker to construct and document their own thinking as they follow trains of thought, get lost, go beyond the obvious or given, break through conventional/consensus notions of ‘truth’-in essence to arrive somewhere different than where they started and in doing so develop deeper understandings in ongoing often non-linear or emergent ways.

We see our **accordion books as maps** of our learning and teaching.

The following sections outline five core ideas of the practice as we have developed it. They are the key overarching concepts that inform important aspects of accordion book practice.

## **6.5 Core Idea #1: Mapping the Terrain: Exploring, Guiding and Getting Lost**

*“We organize information on maps in order to see our knowledge in a new way. As a result, maps suggest explanations; and while explanations reassure us, they also inspire us to ask questions,*

*consider other possibilities. To ask for a map is to say, “Tell me a story.”*

Peter Turchi, *Maps of the Imagination:  
the Writer as Cartographer* (p. 11)

One of the central metaphors that has emerged as an important component of our accordion book practice is Mapping. Mapping is a many layered and flexible metaphor that serves a variety of purposes for reflective practitioners. The “story” being told by the maps in our accordion books is the story of our learning, our processes and our transdisciplinary journeys.

**To Map Is:**

to document,  
to give shape to,  
to explore,  
to guide,  
to get lost,  
and crucially, to *interpret* and make meaning.

**Terrains Are:**

Geographic  
Temporal  
Imagined  
Cultural  
Philosophical  
Emotional/Cognitive  
Conceptual  
Qualitative  
Quantitative

The shifting boundaries, borders, relationships, places, things, and ideas being mapped in accordion books are personal. They are chosen, curated, arranged, and presented by the cartographer/learner/artist. Maps in accordion books are literal, metaphorical, iterative, recursive, constructivist, and not necessarily linear, often circling back upon themselves and even contradicting ideas previously explored. Mapping is inherently about exploring and guiding (learning and teaching). It is the art of slowly unraveling/unveiling/making visible the things we are curious about.

### 6.5.1 Mapping

A Layered Approach: We have identified a layered approach to mapping in accordion book practice. Each layer is anchored by an intention. **Exploration mapping** consists of being *fully steeped* in the curiosity driven, emergent moment. An Exploration map is created *while* one is discovering a place, idea or experience. The learner documents the immediacy of the first person experience, capturing and collecting, exploring and getting lost. At the start of the journey there are no categories. **Reflection mapping** happens upon one's return from an experience. It taps into memories by sorting collections, organizing, and beginning to analyze the journey. This layer can paint an overarching picture by illuminating connections, systems, and relationships. **Inquiry mapping** evolves from the connections that surface in a reflection map. A place or idea grabs ones and pulls ones back to dig deeper. There is still an element of exploring the unknown, a set of unanswered questions, but now there is an inquiry that is driving one's map so that new patterns, deeper meanings, and new avenues for exploration and practice may emerge.

The Exploration mapping layer of accordion book practice is the portal into the other two layers and in many ways the foundation of the entire process. This approach to capturing visceral, immediate, emergent moments is in a sense the opposite of an analytical process. It is a strategy useful when one needs to quickly document a thought or feeling before the fleeting moment, epiphany or experience gets lost. We too often think that powerful moments are indelible, that they will etch themselves into our memory, and while this is true sometimes we cannot count on it being true all the time. This is why it is useful to capture and document important experiences as close to when they occur as possible. The practice of Exploration Mapping is an example of what art educator Sister Corita Kent lists in *Some Rules for Students and Teachers*, "Don't try to create and analyze at the same time. They're different processes." (Kent, 1968) The documenting (capturing and creating) of the important moment comes first, the analysis, connecting, categorizing and building new thoughts and new inquiries comes later. The immediacy of the capturing is driven as much by emotions as by cognition and is a good example of the ways author Catherine Elgin describes emotions and cognition being inextricably woven together in our lived experience of the world. In *Considered Judgment* (1996), Elgin argues that "emotions function *cognitively*, guiding and structuring our **patterns of attention**. Emotions "orient [us], focus attention, and supply grounds for classifying objects as like or unlike." (p. 168) Emotions are crucially important players, guiding us



as we encounter both our internal and external worlds. The intense moments we document quickly in exploration mapping are concrete and visible manifestations of how emotion and cognition are bound together in our processes of making meaning.

### 6.5.2 Getting Lost and Seeing Anew

The mapping encouraged in accordion book practice is not just a representation of what is, but an intention to map that allows the learner to move from *exploration to inquiry* and in the process *get lost and see familiar terrain anew*. To truly map our experience of learning is to get lost, to be comfortable with uncertainty, and to hold and entertain dissimilar ideas simultaneously. Solnit in *A Field Guide to Getting Lost* (2006) articulates “that thing the nature of which is totally unknown to you is usually what you need to find, and finding it is a matter of getting lost.” In order to get lost we must acknowledge a change in mindset as “getting lost was not a matter of geography so much identity, a passionate desire, even an urgent need to become no one and anyone...” (p. 5) Authentic exploration of anything, in contrast to the too often prescribed processes in classrooms inevitably involves uncertainty, messing about experimenting, wandering, being “in the weeds”. David Perkins (2010), in *Future Wise* writes about the need to educate for the unknown, advocating that it “favors a vision of learning aggressive in its effort to foster curiosity, enlightenment, empowerment, and responsibility in a complex and dynamic world.” (p. 23)

Curiosity-driven inquiry can lead us to complex, unruly, confusing and wholly unfamiliar spaces. We feel that these spaces are often the most important and powerful spaces to explore. Dealing with the complexity and uncertainty that confronts us when we are “lost” is a key component of self-driven practice. Resisting easy closure and being in a space of what David Perkins calls “optimal ambiguity” (Hetland, 2013, p. 97) can lead to unexpected discoveries, surprises and deeper dives into uncharted terrains. Artists are always in search of this edge between the known and the unknown and seem to engage with it with far less angst than others. There is something to learn from this desire for the unknown. Peter Turchi, in *Maps of the Imagination* writes:

*“Artistic creation is a voyage into the unknown. In our own eyes, we are off the map. The excitement of potential discovery is accompanied by anxiety, despair, caution, perhaps, perhaps boldness, and,*

*always, the risk of failure. Failure can take the form of becoming hopelessly lost, or pointlessly lost, or not finding what we came for (though that last is sometimes happily accompanied by the discovery of something we didn't anticipate, couldn't even imagine before we found it). We strike out for what we believe to be uncharted waters, only to find ourselves sailing in someone else's bathtub. Those are the days it seems there is nothing new to discover but the limitations of our own experience and understanding.” (p. 13)*

Designer/Educator Kenya Hara calls this process “Unknowing The World” (Hara, 2015) and calls the insights gained by allowing one’s self to get lost in exploration “Ex-formation”, conceived in counterpoint to Information. Ex-formation consists of insights that reveal to learners/artists “how little they know of the world” Because, says Hara “If you can figure out how much you don’t know, the method by which you will know it will appear naturally.” (p. 16) This kind of purposeful, generative getting lost has the potential to stand in stark and exciting contrast to the predictability of schooling, arts education and other disciplinary explorations.

Allowing oneself to truly get lost requires considerable courage and scaffolding. A step in this direction is to help young people and ourselves to be able to re-see what we have already been conditioned to see by our education or our upbringing. Maps and mapmaking can allow the **re-seeing** of previously “over-familiar” terrains in a multiplicity of ways. Maps illuminate connections and present both the big picture and the small details. They invite criticality, intuition, and the possibility of multiple readings of information and can uncover patterns and relationships and make systems visible. One goal of the different kinds of mapping in accordion book practice is to begin to see our “taken for granted” landscapes anew. Landscape researchers da Cunha and Mathur (2010) push against a certain conditioning that becomes embedded in our understanding of familiar places and acknowledge the near impossibility of imagining a place in any way that is different from the way it is embedded in our imagination. To see anew and to allow ourselves to get lost becomes a battle we have to play with ourselves. By visualizing, juxtaposing and applying coding strategies to both literal and metaphorical terrains we can shift the way we see and understand them in new and different ways. This process is akin to what Augusto Boal (2002) called “de-mechanization” a term the theater artist, educator and activist uses to describe the breaking down of our habitual, conditioned, reflexive ways of seeing and acting in the world. Boal accomplished de-mechanization through engagement in a

variety of theater games. We think a similar process can occur when we apply different mapping strategies to our previously taken for granted terrains.

To be willing to be/get lost and have the confidence to let go of preconditioned ideas takes courage and a certain agency mindset, one that is steeped in a confidence of learning from the process and an excitement in learning for oneself. Perkins (2009) uses the term “proactive learner” to describe this taking charge as one explores uncharted territory.

*“In general, proactive learners work to make the game worth playing for themselves, not depending so much on hit-or-miss inspiration from others nor on coercion with rewards and punishments. Teachers who encourage learners to take charge to some extent of their own motivation are helping them to develop autonomy as learners.” (p. 203)*

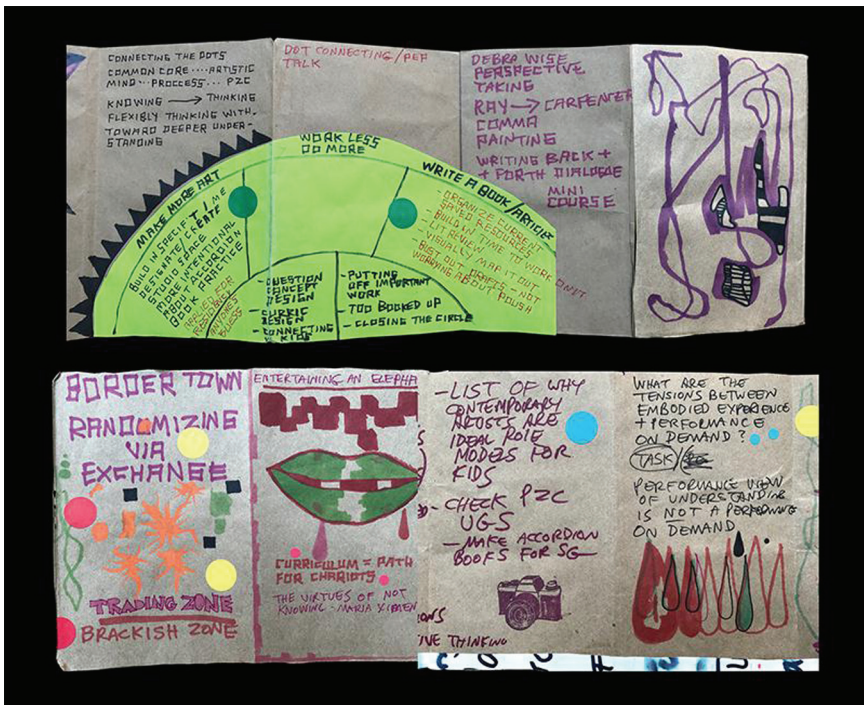


Figure 6.3 Excerpts from Todd Elkin's accordion book.

## 6.6 Core Idea #2 Exchange as Art: What Happens in an Exchange?

*“Talk to people you know. Talk to people you don’t know. Talk to people you never talk to. Be intrigued by the differences you hear. Expect to be surprised. Treasure curiosity more than certainty.”*

Margaret Wheatley, *Turning To One Another: Simple Conversations to Restore Hope to the Future* (p. 145)

Learning is far from an individual pursuit and although in the above section on mapping we have focused primarily on the individual learner and their internal and external disposition to proactive learning, we also believe in learning as a social and collective exercise, a series of constant exchanges with others and the world around us. What exactly is taking place in an exchange? What changes in an exchange? And why are many contemporary artists organizing their work around different types of interpersonal exchanges? These questions seemed generative and important to us in this present historical moment in which we and many other educators are striving to create opportunities in classrooms and other learning spaces in which relational (Bourriaud, 1998) emotional, and interpersonal realms of teaching, learning, and collaborative art making can thrive. Claire Bishop (2011) in indicates that *“One of the main impetuses behind participatory art has been a restoration of the social bond through a collective elaboration of meaning.”* (p. 12) For us and other arts and nonarts educators, the accordion book has become a flexible focal point for different types of powerful exchanges as it encourages acts of collective meaning making about the world we live in.

Why is the idea of exchange a generative lens through which to look at our practice as teachers, artists, and world citizens? The word exchange evokes diverse ideas ranging from things like love, gift, barter, argument, garage sale, to collaboration and globalization. We may not even be fully conscious of the many daily exchanges we make within the capital, social, interpersonal and redistributive economic systems that we live in. Exchanges of power in classrooms, in workspaces, and between individuals are happening all the time. Relationships in nature and between humans are sometimes mutually beneficial, sometimes exploitative, sometimes parasitic, and often transformative in both positive and negative ways. Looking at the various dynamics and qualities of these different types of interpersonal exchanges can reveal a lot about degrees of democracy, who is empowered, who is being disempowered, and what new forms and ideas are arising out of the

exchanges. In their work on teacher agency, Biesta, Priestley and Robinson (2015) articulate an ecological view of agency that moves from seeing agency in isolation to looking at in relation to time (past, present and future) experience and possibilities. We share this here because this relational view of agency is linked to exchange and the motivations for learning that come from a variety of exchanges. In their definition of agency, Emirbayer and Mische (1998) describe agency as “*temporal-relational contexts of action*” (p. 970) again articulating the relational nature of agency to one’s history, experience and interactions.

Classrooms, artistic collaborations, and other social settings can become experimental spaces for looking at and intentionally structuring different types of exchanges. Social Practice/Socially Engaged artists have been exploring this terrain for many years, creating relational situations or interventions in which exchanges between artists and audiences are foregrounded. Contemporary artists Rirkrit Tiravanija, Oliver Herring and Thomas Hirschhorn have created powerfully engaging works involving exchanges of food, conversation, artistic experimentation and moments of teaching/learning. Here, the role of the artist becomes that of a catalyst, setting off chains of interaction and inquiry. We find it exciting to think of educators and classrooms in this same way-as spaces of collective, collaborative, and relational possibility and action where we can look closely at **exchange as art practice**.

There are many possibilities for making accordion books a hub of exchange-centered interaction in classrooms, art spaces, between colleagues, friends and relative strangers. Structured protocols can be designed around different types of generative exchange. Here are some overarching categories around which exchange-based protocols and strategies can be designed:

### 6.6.1 Collaboration

In classrooms and other social learning spaces, accordion books have great potential for being at the center of meaningful collaborations. They can become flexible hubs for the exchange and influence of ideas on one another, moving each individual beyond what they are able to perceive/think/feel on their own. They can create opportunities for developing an open, appreciative approach to difference and otherness, helping to shift perspectives, change mindsets and come into contact with worldviews that are different than one’s own. They can be catalysts for moving toward mutually built ideas, projects or products. Accordion Books can be a site where different types

of collaborations can be planned, documented and enacted. These types of accordion book-centered collaborations shift learners away from the stereotype of the artist (or other disciplinary practitioner) as “lone genius” as well as moving learning communities away from education as individualistic pursuit/toward an acknowledgment of diversity and richness that comes from various kind of exchanges. Accordion book-centered collaborations can encourage perspective taking and acknowledging of differences. Students are thus able to become metacognitive about how exchanges influence them and their learning. In a conversation with Language Arts teacher Kristen Kullberg (July 2014, personal communication with Mistry.) we learned of her experimentation with accordion books with ESL students while the teacher and students read a text together. She created a shared accordion book with students and they used images and words to illustrate understanding of the text and created space for individual reflection and shared reflection. Kristen noticed a growing confidence in her students and tangible evidence of deeper understanding of the text.

### **6.6.2 Dialogue/Feedback**

Dialogically driven classrooms and art spaces are potentially rich in both structured and free flows of communication. Accordion Books can be places where ongoing peer to peer feedback, critique and assessment can live. Learners can trade accordion books, and borrow or “steal” (with permission) ideas from each others’ accordions. Ongoing dialogues between members of learning communities can be captured in accordion books and revisited/built upon over time. Because accordion books help make learning visible, there is an opportunity to see paths and traces of exchange when students view each others accordion books together and draw from each others’ ideas.

## **6.7 Core Idea #3 Things Talk to Me: Being Alert to What Grabs Me**

*“I was paying so little attention to most of what was right before us that I had become a sleepwalker on the sidewalk. What I saw and attended to was exactly what I expected to see; what my dog showed me was that my attention invited along attention’s companion: inattention to everything else.”*

Alexandra Horowitz, *On Looking: Eleven Walks with Expert Eyes* (p. 2)

The world is talking to us. How do we pay attention and talk back? At the very core of our accordion book practice is the act of **noticing**; being alert to how the world talks to us; developing a deep, nuanced sense of curiosity; engaging in “extreme noticing” then capturing and reflecting about the qualities and natures of the things we notice. For Students, artists, teachers and other disciplinary practitioners, developing dispositions associated with a deep attentiveness to the world is a prerequisite to the development of ongoing self-driven inquiries and a personal agentic practice.

As educators, artists and practitioners we have an explicit belief and a sense of trust that what catches and holds our attention is fundamentally valid and worthwhile of our focus. Unfortunately schools, particularly mainstream education both in India and the United States teach us that our observations are not as valid as the teacher’s or the text. We as artists believe that one’s internal attentional compasses are reliable drivers of interest driven learning, disciplinary practices and deeply personal reflections, and that we should nurture this compass. When we begin capturing, documenting, and being thoughtful about what we notice, we embark on a journey of many diverging paths. Following these paths, and creatively capturing, analyzing, and building upon the things we gather, is our practice. Olivia Gude (2009) describes this practice as being “intensely conscious of both inner experiences and of the prompting of the outer world—this heightened dual awareness is a defining characteristic of artistic process.” Things are talking to us, and we are in dialogue with them. In this process, emotion and cognition are not dichotomous processes but are intimately joined. (Elgin, 1996). Thus, it becomes possible to develop a sense of personal agency by engaging in creative inquiry, meaning-making, and systemic thinking (Marshall 2014). It is worth mentioning that the proactive, self-driven, “noticing-centered” practice described above sits in contrast to business-as-usual compliance-centered versions of education and work life. Orienting ourselves to internal and external worlds represents empowering and democratizing notions of practice.

### 6.7.1 Grabbiness

In Todd Elkin’s high school art classroom, in the courses he teaches for other teachers, and in his own transdisciplinary art and research practice the concept of **Grabbiness** has become a central and driving principal. Elkin defines the term this way: “Something is said to be grabby if it *catches*, and most crucially, *holds* your attention. Grabby things can be visual, conceptual,

or both. Grabby things can be repulsive or attractive.” Elkin uses the idea of Grabbiness and a closely related idea “Extreme Noticing” to center alertness, attentiveness, curiosity and the development of interest-driven, proactive inquiry in his pedagogy. Becoming alert and then looking for themes and patterns in the things we notice is the beginning of a journey. It is a habit you tweak and nurture into greater sensitivities until it informs your practice, your artwork and triggers new inquiries. We believe that supporting students in developing alertness to things in their worlds, both internal and external, sets them on a path toward their own personal practice. *Building alertness* to things and ideas is linked to the *inclination* to pursue an interest-based inquiry and the subsequent development of *skills* to execute that inquiry (Hetland et al., 2007) This is a cornerstone of our practice as educators and fundamental to accordion book processes.

Accordion books are spaces where the grabby things we notice when our external or internal worlds are talking to us are captured, documented, revisited and built upon. Those initial capturings and documentations, referred to above as “Exploration Mapping” are the first steps in developing an agentic personal practice. This is the crucial foundation upon which the other layers, Reflection Mapping and Inquiry Mapping can be built.

### **6.7.2 Revisiting Documentation**

The artifacts/words/pictures we collect when we document a Grabby experience image or concept are not meant to be stashed away, never to be revisited. Carlina Rinaldi (2006) writes about the Reggio Emilia model of early childhood education, where documentations of experiences are brought back for rereading, revisiting, and the reconstruction of the experience so that they “intervene during the learning path and within the learning process in a way that would give meaning and direction to the process.” (p. 25) Similarly, one of Todd Elkin’s students spoke of the usefulness of accordion books in capturing/documenting Grabby things by referring to them to them as “external hard drives”. Indeed accordion books can provide excellent ‘back up’ for our not always reliable ‘human computers’ as well as providing visually engaging foundations for ongoing constructivist learning and practice.

### **6.7.3 Unintentional, Intentional and Natural Grabbiness**

One way to frame the idea of Grabbiness in a more systematic and perhaps more nuanced way is to organize the things that catch and hold one’s attention into the categories of Unintentional, Intentional and Natural. Broadly,



**Unintentionally Grabby** things are just that, they are *not* purposefully and/or optimally placed in one's path in order to catch your attention. There is not a strategizing/animating intelligence that has placed these things in front of you with some kind of agenda behind it. Examples of Unintentionally Grabby things are the patterns of oil stains and cracks in a paved road, pieces of beach glass catching sunlight as they poke out of sand dunes, or the shapes that are formed in between the crossing wires from your lamp, modem and computer. Also in this category are juxtapositions of things not purposely placed together, like a child's shoe dropped in the gutter being partially covered windblown newspaper. The placements of Unintentionally Grabby things are more subject to the operations of chance than the other two categories listed above.

Times Square in NYC is in many ways the paradigmatic example of **Intentional Grabbiness**. Every square inch is packed with visual information, from gigantic animated billboards to scrolling LED news bulletins to Jumbotron video displays. Times Square is, like other major centers of 21st Century cities, a cacophonous symphony of purposefully placed visual/aural stimulation primarily designed to influence the spending habits of the viewer/consumer. Indeed, advertising, media, and other works of visual and popular culture shape our "noticing" muscles in strategic ways. In his seminal book, *Ways of Seeing* (1972) John Berger offers us a plethora of critical lenses to examine and understand the endless sea of imagery vying to intentionally grab and hold our attention, in some cases designed to influence us to spend or vote. Here Berger unpacks what he sees as one motivation behind the strategic and manipulative psychological techniques employed in advertising, which Berger refers to here as "publicity": "Publicity persuades us of such a transformation by showing us people who have apparently been transformed and are, as a result, enviable. The state of being envied is what constitutes glamour. And publicity is the process of manufacturing glamour." (p. 131) While advertising and other forms of market-driven visual culture are important examples of Intentional Grabbiness, there are others. Works of "Fine Art" also fall within the category of things that are Intentionally Grabby. While works of fine art occupy a complicated and somewhat slippery space within systems of commerce and culture, there is a sense within the fine arts (which can and must be looked at skeptically/critically) that the animating purposes and strategies visual artists use to intentionally catch and hold viewers' attention have much more to do with "purely" aesthetic (or anti-aesthetic which is an aesthetic of its own) and/or conceptual concerns and/or the attempt to give shape to internal and external 'worlds'

than the “purely” market driven motives and techniques of advertisers. This Art/Commerce divide may very well be a complete fallacy (look at blue chip fine art auctions for evidence of this fallacy) but there has been a general and widespread contention, primarily born out of the history of artistic avant-gardes in modernist and postmodernist movements and reinforced in arts universities, that contemporary fine artists enjoy a greater sense of freedom to explore, experiment, offend and otherwise catch their potential viewers’ attentions in unusual ways, ways untethered to and unconcerned with the concerns and strategies of the advertiser and the market. What complicates this already problematic space is the fact that advertisers/graphic designers (many of whom are art school graduates) continually appropriate the visual and conceptual strategies of contemporary visual artists so that a) it has become harder to tell the difference between “fine” and “commercial” artworks and consequently b) “fine” artists must work harder to differentiate themselves and their work from “crass commercialism”. Another artistic subcategory of Intentional Grabbiness consists of visual works explicitly designed to directly persuade viewers in a political sense. These works, often labeled Propaganda have been ever present features in our visual landscapes almost since the invention of reproducible images. Makers of Persuasive Art/Propaganda use these visual works to convey strongly held opinions/beliefs about political issues and are trying to influence the viewer/audience to take some kind of action. The purpose of the artwork is to convince the viewer that this opinion is correct and/or that a particular action is called for. Persuasive Art often appeals to emotions, hopes and fears as well as moral beliefs. It is important for teachers and parents to support young people in developing a critical visual literacy in the face of the ever present surround of all types of visual culture coming literally from all directions.

The Final Category of Grabbiness, familiar to anyone who has been captivated by a sunset, a starry sky or a desert landscape is **Natural Grabbiness**. In his book *Truth Beauty and Goodness Reframed* (2011) Howard Gardner recounts that for many people, and even across cultures, notions of beauty are derived from qualities found in nature. (pp. 42–44) For whatever reason (evolutionary adaptation, neurological “hardwiring”, cultural conditioning) things from the realms of nature seem strongly compelling to great numbers of people across the world. Indeed, the authors of this chapter each have our own separate corners of the natural world that “talk to us”, that consistently catch and hold our attention. For Arzu Mistry it is plants, and after a lifetime of being drawn to them Mistry has become a scholar of plants. Mistry writes, “I’ve learned to read their clues and tricks for enticing me as well as all the

insect, bird, and animal collaborators they lure and put to use.” (Mistry & Elkin 2016, p. 11). For Todd Elkin it is Crows. After years of observing them and their behavior Elkin writes “I now care about them and am concerned for their well-being. I’m alert to and aware of both anecdotal and scientific evidence of their intelligence and abilities. I perk up when I see or hear anything about crows in print or online. My interest in them has become a strand of semi-formal research.” (p. 42) For both of us, our accordion books have become the sites for our ongoing strands of research, musings, images and ever deepening engagement with trees, crows and many other things both natural and human made.

It is perhaps obvious but still important to note that the “things that talk to” different individuals and the reasons why they are Grabby are as various and diverse as we are as separate sentient beings. We are all informed by our own idiosyncratic sets of experiences, cultural lenses, points of view, frames of reference, biases, fascinations, pet peeves, traumas, memories and dreams. These factors shape not only *what* we are drawn to in our worlds but also *how* we interpret the things we find to be Grabby. A key element in determining both the what and the how of noticing and making meaning, as mentioned above, is our emotions, or perhaps more accurately the ongoing interplay between our emotions and our cognition. Far from taking an unreliable backseat to cognitive processes, our emotions play a crucial role in how we engage with and process our worlds. And so, to live is to be in a unique (to each of us) ongoing dialogue between the things that talk to us, our cognitively functioning emotions and the continuous meaning we make of it all.

#### **6.7.4 Using Accordion Books to Capture the Dialogue**

As we have described above, accordion book practice can be a layered process of mapping one’s journey of exploring, reflecting and embarking on new inquiries. The world is talking to all of us twenty four hours a day (even in our dreams) and Accordion Books help us to document, organize, and analyze our ongoing dialogues with the world and most importantly make it possible to revisit, reflect and build upon them. David Perkins (2014) talks about the question of whether or not educational topics have an “afterlife” or “comeuppance”, in other words, once topics are presented in classrooms, do they ever again “come up” in learners lives? Do they have a useful life *after school*? These two somewhat playfully humorous terms are another way for Perkins to ask the question “Is this topic relevant? Is it indeed worth

learning?” (p. 52) Gardner (2011) Speaks of one of the three antecedents for determining something to be beautiful being “the impulse, the inclination, the desire to encounter again, to revisit” (p. 53) Here we can transpose the word Grabby with Beautiful. Grabby things are by their nature worthy of exploring further, our interest in them gives them an ongoing “afterlife” and accordion books are the space where that afterlife takes place and can be built upon. This is the practice of ongoing art-centered research.

## **6.8 Core Idea #4: What Would an Artist Do? Teachers and Students as Contemporary Artists**

We think **contemporary artists are excellent role models for both teachers and learners**. They are proactive, self-driven free agents. They are “fired up”, in that there is a palpable sense that they are compelled to do what they do, and have an extremely high level of engagement and sense of purpose in their work. As teachers, we would love nothing more than to help ignite this kind of drive and “purposiveness” in ourselves and our students. The sense of purposeful agency evinced in contemporary artists’ practice is precisely what we have been referring to throughout this chapter as the set of dispositions we want to support as educators. In addition, the different types of idiosyncratic process-based practices of artists provide what we think are extremely useful models for teaching, learning and transdisciplinary inquiry.

An artist’s work is driven by a variety of catalysts, but at its root, artists, like scientists, mathematicians, historians and other disciplinary practitioners are trying to understand the world. Toward that end they are proactive meaning makers in these ways: *artists synthesize, envision, reframe, catalyze, trigger, juxtapose, persuade, inform, translate, narrate, hybridize, analyze, bridge, connect, invent, explore, experiment, predict, play tricks, observe, critique, provoke, think systemically, inquire creatively, explore multiple perspectives and take part in conversations about the crucial issues of our time.*

*Also:*

Artists’ work is research; an inquiry process that often results in new insight. Artists are both explorers and guides.

Artists trust processes, have growth mindsets and embrace failures as unavoidable and instructive.

Artists understand that the world is an inherently transdisciplinary place, which means that they must adopt transdisciplinary approaches.

Artworks are catalysts for dialogue and the construction of meaning.

Artists give shape to internal and external worlds.

Artists are both critical thinkers and critical changemakers.

Artists perform functions that other types of practitioners do not. They affect transformations, operate simultaneously on intellectual and emotional levels, and dwell in liminal, interstitial spaces. They are shamans, tricksters, magicians, healers, and breakers of boundaries and taboos.

But where and how have the powerful dispositions of contemporary artists and the forms, methods and purposes of contemporary art practice stood in relationship to the goals/purposes and practices of progressive education?

There are many ways in which contemporary artistic practices include explicitly or implicitly epistemological, or pedagogical aspects. Occurrences of contemporary art, increasingly happening outside of museums and galleries, often feature different types of participatory, reflective and potentially transformative dialogic/interpersonal exchanges. In addition to exchanges of ideas and dialogue, of material goods and services or of collaborative actions, much contemporary art practice, either intentionally or not creates moments of teaching and learning. Artists such as Suzanne Lacy, Abigail DeVille, LaToya Ruby-Frazier, Oliver Herring, Rirkrit Tiravanija, Tania Bruguera, The Yes Men, Thomas Hirschhorn, the team of Allora and Calzadilla and many others have created interventions in social spaces or acted as catalysts in collaborative situations in which participants engage in various types of creative inquiries. These often interdisciplinary exchanges-sometimes resulting in the making of physical art pieces, sometimes consisting of ephemeral improvisatory or facilitated verbal dialogues share the quality of decentering the role of the artist, shifting the locus of creative inquiry on to other individuals or groups of participants. These shifts in dynamics are parallel to changes that have been taking place in progressive education circles, such as the Reggio Emilia focus on student centered inquiry or Eleanor Duckworth's Critical Exploration methodologies (2006) or indeed the central role of non-hierarchical dialogue in the pedagogy of Paolo Freire (1970).

It is tempting to trace the roots of the relatively recent reorienting shifts in contemporary art practice and their pedagogical bent- shifting away from the confined/confining spaces of galleries and museums and toward a variety of 'relational' social spheres-to the late 1950's when Allan Kaprow pioneered Happenings, artworks designed as socially constructed collaborative events. One could also go a bit further back to the early paradigm shattering and provocative work of Marcel Duchamp, whose Readymades, ordinary

factory-made objects such as snow shovels, bicycle wheels, and most famously *The Fountain*, a urinal, upended notions of what could and should be called art and thus triggered all sorts of contentious dialogue and debate in and outside of the “art world” in Duchamp’s era and beyond and for the first time ushered in notions of “art as idea”.

Duchamp and Kaprow’s provocations have reverberated through the decades and have inspired all sorts of conceptual practices and theories which in turn have triggered fresh rounds of debate around the increasingly blurry borderlines between ‘art’, ‘life’ and what defines an educational space. Indeed Allan Kaprow himself explicitly entered the educational arena in the late 1960’s with *Project Other Ways*, in which Kaprow and educator Herbert Kohl took over a storefront in Berkeley California and engaged with public school students and teachers in a variety of workshops and semester long explorations. According to Kaprow, “*Project Other Ways* was intent on merging the arts with things not considered art, namely training in reading, writing, maths and so on.” (Bishop, 1994, p. 84) In one notable *Project Other Ways* experiment, Kaprow worked with a group of Berkeley 6th graders who had previously been labeled as “hopelessly illiterate” and through a project in which the students photo-documented their communities and then annotated and wrote increasingly skilled descriptions and narratives about their photographs, Kaprow and Kohl facilitated a space in which this group of young people were able to, using artistic strategies, collaboratively give shape to ideas about their communities’ heroes and villains as well as rewriting, illustrating and casting critical eyes on outmoded school readers containing problematic stereotypes and biases. Ultimately, through the art-centered interdisciplinary methods and works produced by the youth in *Project Other Way*, these 6th graders were able to show the teachers and administrators in Berkeley that they were in fact extremely literate after all.

The boundary pushing works of artists who make work today in the genres of Social Practice or Socially Engaged Art Practice are descendants of Duchamp and Kaprow as well as of the paradigm stretching, conceptual, street, feminist, and video/performance artists from the 1960’s to today who have consistently sought to bring ‘art’ and ‘life’ together in meaningful ways to effect social change, spark insights and indeed to inspire learning.

### **6.8.1 Contemporary Art Practice/Pedagogic Practice/Accordion Book Practice: Challenges, Methods and Forms**

Through intentional reorientations/shifts we’ve made in the way we frame and define what we do, the dividing lines between transdisciplinary teaching,

learning, research and contemporary art practice are increasingly falling away. We no longer feel the necessity to compartmentalize what had previously been separate, albeit related undertakings. For us, there is increasing overlap between the heretofore separate aspects of our practice.

There have been criticisms to thinking about teaching and learning in this way. Over the past several years art historian Claire Bishop (2012) has written a series of works that critically push back against both Socially Engaged Art Practices and in particular “Pedagogic Art Projects”. Although many of Bishop’s critiques are valid, we feel there is considerable value in the educative qualities of contemporary artistic practice. For many years Elkin and Mistry have taught a course that shares the title of this section, *What Would an Artist Do?* In it we have endeavored to build a bridge between education practice and the work of participatory/contemporary artists and thus give teachers tools and insights about the connection between the two. The course gives teachers an interdisciplinary path into the strategies of artists and in particular, the way artists respond to the world around them. We share many examples of artworks dealing with important issues of our time. The artworks engage science, history, journalism, sociology, architecture and more. Using artifacts from contemporary issues, Mistry and Elkin designed a collaborative thinking process akin to the accordion book processes of exploration, reflection and inquiry mapping, coding and collaborative conversations in order to support teachers in seeing the interdisciplinary intersections in the content and practices of artists. Through orientations that focus on Deep Observation, Constructing Narrative, Persuasion, Perspective Taking, Experimentation and Intervention teachers are encouraged to develop rough drafts for contemporary art interventions. Both the processes in the course and the outcomes of a plan for a contemporary art intervention are designed to make visible to teachers the link between progressive education and contemporary art practices and the potential for creative agency in the classroom. The course models for teachers several possibilities for contemporary artistic approaches to addressing important specific and thematic issues of our time. We strongly believe that the forms, methods, knowledge, purposes, and contemporary artists’ ways of being and doing are essential and core components of teaching, learning, and being in the world.

Accordion book practices are situated within an overarching set of process-driven methods, forms and purposes in which students and teachers are engaging in proactive interest-driven creative inquiry. Taken together these sets of methods and purposes form a pedagogy consistent with both the processes and products of contemporary art practice. Finally, there is a sense

in which the processes of contemporary art inquiry are always epistemological, in that artists are engaged in a flexible and continually unfolding iterative dialogue in and through their work which is very much a self-directed process of learning. And while accordion book practices are very much process-centered, engaging in the gathering, sorting, mapping, coding, analyzing and building upon the inquiries in accordion book practice, there is an intention of action where learners/teachers/artists create, select, focus, frame and curate their content to present as works of contemporary art.

## **6.9 Core Idea #5: Getting Out of My Own Way: Trusting the Process and Resisting Closure**

*“Sometimes when I make work, there is a moment when what I want to make and what I make it with fuse in such a way that the piece begins, against my intention, to take on a form of its own. It is as though I am no longer the prime mover. At this point what is in front of me becomes as strange to me as I am essentially to myself. This is the point I am always trying to reach.”*

*Paul Chan, Selected Writings (pg. 189)*

There are many differing purposes and drives behind personal inquiries and reflective practice. While one motivation to inquire comes from curiosity about the world, other inquiries might come from an individual’s desire to make one’s practice better, to move beyond what we know (or think we know) or often, as we will discuss here, to get unstuck. Teachers as contemporary practitioners are constantly navigating the shifting grounds of their field, their own beliefs, experiences, insecurities, and personal practice. At any given moment in a teacher or learner’s life there are forces that can easily lead to immobilization or becoming fixed in limiting ideas or ideologies. Teachers and students are continually subjected to ever-shifting cacophonies of educational paradigms, positions and mandates bombarding them with ideas, challenges, critiques, and memes. Sometimes these memes provide pithy, quick answers to the daunting and messy issues of our time. By distilling the complexity of our world, memes offer us for/against pro/con binaries and catchy quick fixes that run the risk of causing people to form instantaneous and exclusionary allegiances. Some memes can feel reactionary and reductionist, and are often false binaries which often foreclose the possibility of seeing multiple ways, perspectives and points of view. Learning that



over-focuses on predetermined outcomes, “products” or notions of “excellence” can also cause us to feel stuck and uninspired, numbly marching towards foregone conclusions or rushing towards “definitive” closure. In this jostle, what happens to the “inner-selves” of teachers and students? (Narayanan, 2008) How can we persevere in our personal practices with all these outside forces, standards and mandates creating potentially paralyzing obstacles for us?

In addition, it is easy to feel overwhelmed by the pervasive “noise” in contemporary life which can interfere with our ability to make meaning to the point where suddenly we cannot “see the forest for the trees.” We can become immobilized by uncertainty—so uncomfortable with not knowing that we ultimately quit trying. Or we feel stuck in certainty, which makes it seem like there is just one way to think or act which blinds us from seeing alternative ways. Whatever the causes may be, our classrooms, workspaces, and indeed our internal thoughts and feelings can too often feel like predictable, constraining, non-permeable “boxes” that we want to escape. The feeling of getting stuck, or being “in our own way”, like failure, is an inevitable occurrence in all human practices. Finding ways to persevere through the different types of noise and moments of difficulty however is key to any thriving creative inquiry.

### 6.9.1 How Do We Get Out of Our Own Way?

We have found that this negotiation between personal process and the internal and external “noise” in our worlds makes having a personal reflective practice (accordion book practice) even more necessary. Through this ongoing iterative and often non linear process we can begin the journey of creating permeable and integrated learning; we can start to see continua rather than false binaries; to trust our process and thus become more comfortable with uncertainty; to be more alive and alert to the possibilities of a given moment rather than worrying about goals, deadlines and outcomes.

Many artists find it invaluable, when stuck, to tap into the dynamics of randomness or chance and thus release themselves from repetitive and/or stifling patterns. Artists Aris Moore says “*When I am stuck . . . I just search for excitement, but not too hard. It is when I find myself playing more than trying that I find my way out of a block.*” (Krysa 2014, p. 22). Songwriter Bob Dylan throws I-Ching coins (2005) Brian Eno and Peter Schmidt created the Oblique Strategies: a deck of cards, pulled randomly, that offer ways out when an artist is feeling “blocked”. Poet/singer Patti Smith consults tarot cards at

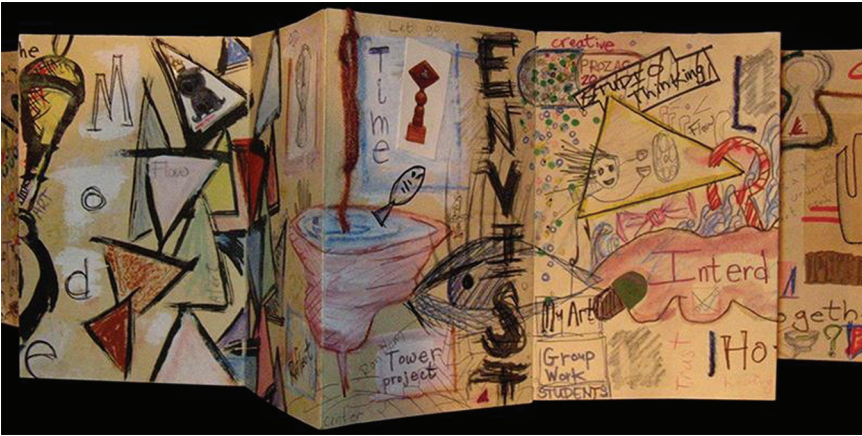
decisive moments in her work. There are many other strategies shared by artists and designers to break creative blocks through the strategic use of chance, by tapping into hidden reserves of perseverance, by “letting go” or creating “generative limits”. Here are a few examples:

**Constraints:** Abstract painter James Siena (2012–13) gives himself sets of directions for his artworks which he calls algorithms. Generative tensions arise between the rigidity of the rules he sets for himself and what his fallible human hand can actually do. Siena has found these types of constraints to be ultimately freeing.

**De Mechanization:** As mentioned above, theatre artist, activist, and political visionary Augusto Boal (2002) developed numerous games for actors and non-actors alike, and believed they could be used to transform and liberate everyone. Within his concept of **de-mechanization**, the mind is tricked by the action of the body to free itself from the patterns of our upbringing and the conditioning of social acceptability. “The process of ‘thinking with our hands’ can short-circuit the censorship of the brain.” (p. xxiii)

**The Paradox of Control:** In his work on Flow Theory, Csikszentmihalyi (1990) shares eight components of the phenomenology of enjoyment. Of these, the “paradox of control” (p. 59) is particularly relevant here. He writes about the distinction between exercising control in difficult situations and being worried about losing control. When we become dependent on being able to control, we start to lose control. Order and control can become addictive and result in an unwillingness to engage with life’s ambiguities. A conscious letting-go of the need to control can be a step toward feeling less stuck. Figure 6.4.

**Stretch and Explore/Engage and Persist:** In their seminal work resulting in the development of the Studio Thinking Framework and the Eight Studio Habits of Mind, Lois Hetland, Ellen Winner, et al. (2013) have proposed that the essence of an arts-centered education is not the art product, but rather the development of “artistic mind.” Key to this development, and to the frame of this section, is the fact that artists are continually devising new ways to explore and reach beyond their habitual ways of doing and knowing. Rather than viewing mistakes and “failures” as dead ends, artists often see them as opportunities to grow. “Stretching and Exploring” are important parts of getting out of our own way, as is, crucially the inclination to “Engage and Persist”. As art educator Corita Kent stated, “the only rule is work. If you work it will lead to something.” (Rule 7). Hetland and Winner’s identification of *Engaging and Persisting* as a crucial set of dispositions of the artist aligns with the ideas of Carol Dweck, who identified the phenomena of Growth



**Figure 6.4** Excerpt from Jesse Standlea's accordion book.

and Fixed Mindsets. (Dweck, 2006) A growth mindset (as exemplified in an artist or learner Engaging and Persisting) sees learning, rather than being an “either you get it or you don’t” proposition, as something in which there are multiple opportunities to deepen and grow understandings. In their book *Studio thinking 2*, Hetland and Winner also reference the work of Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (1990) in describing the ways in which the high levels of engagement found in any self-driven artistic practice are “autotelic” (self-rewarding) a key feature in a state of “Flow” (p. 67) This type of intrinsic satisfaction creates in the engaged artist/learner an inclination to “push through” inevitable setbacks and failures. We have seen this deep sense of engagement in accordion book practice and believe that the ongoing and consistent capturing of all aspects of process (breakthroughs, challenges, failures) the “dailyness” of practice, can bolster growth mindsets conducive to engaging and persisting.

## 6.10 Pictures of Accordion Book Practice

As we have mentioned above, a great many teachers, artists and students have reported to us that they they have found using accordion books, in the ways we have been describing in this chapter to be an extremely useful, flexible and a multifaceted tool. For many, the accordion book has become a central hub in their various pursuits, woven/embedded into their teaching/learning/inquiries in ways they describe as expansive and generative. In the following section

we will share the work of some fellow educators and students who have embraced the use of accordion books, initially through interactions with Elkin and Mistry (in both formal and informal settings/learning communities) and eventually as a regular/ongoing personal practice. Many of those who have continued to use accordion books beyond their initial interactions with us (as students or colleagues in the professional development sessions we have led for educators and artists) have developed their own very personal sets of strategies/forms and purposes for their work with accordion books, tailored to suit their own particular needs and goals as learners/teachers/artists. This proactive use of accordion books' various forms and methods is evidence to us that this practice has supported these individuals in being agents of their own learning/inquiry/artistic practice. Here are the stories of a few such individuals who have embraced accordion book practice as an important element in learning, teaching and/or artistic practice.

### **6.10.1 Derek Fenner: Things Talk to Me, Exchange, What Would an Artist Do?**

Derek Fenner is a poet, educator, publisher, visual artist and researcher currently completing a PhD at Mills College in Oakland CA, USA. He has done extensive work with youth in the juvenile justice system and is currently leading ongoing professional development opportunities for teachers and youth leaders throughout the state of California and the U.S. as well as publishing collections of poetry through Bootstrap Press, the publishing house he co-founded in 2000. Derek had been familiar with the accordion book as a form in bookbinding and printmaking and was a student of different types of codices. He became reacquainted with the form through his work with the Alameda County Office of Education's Integrated Learning Specialist Program, where Todd Elkin had introduced accordion book practice as a common reflective/meaning making strategy amongst the teachers and learners in this sequence of three courses for educators based in the San Francisco Bay Area. Through his work in ILSP as faculty and a collaborative leader in the program Derek was able to develop related sets of accordion book strategies useful in the many different contexts he works, including his work as a poet and a doctoral candidate. Here Fenner describes some of the qualities of his own very personal experience using accordion books:

“I used them myself way before bringing them into the classroom setting, and what I noticed is that it is a true representation. It feels

more like a painting than a journal because it represents time in a way that painting would represent time. So it's not a snapshot. It's actually something that's a much slower process that's developed on the surface over a much longer period of time." (D. Fenner, personal interview with Elkin, July 20, 2017).

Fenner has noted a progression of personalization similar to his own happening amongst the teachers and youth, he has been sharing accordion book processes with. "What I love about them [accordion books] is that they're very much unique to the individual making it. And they may start off with just replicating ideas from other people, 'Oh, it's cool you put a pocket' or, 'Oh, it's cool you collaged,' or, "Oh, it's cool that you're coding it in this way."

"When I started using it with teachers and students, all of a sudden it was after they got into it a little bit, their own aesthetics started to seep in and all of a sudden you could tell. Like, an accordion book halfway through, all of a sudden everything shifted. And they started off and it was all of the models that we were giving them or they were seeing from their fellow students, and then they ended up eventually ending, and most of them would then immediately start over a new accordion book because they had found their method."

Derek also found that the cultural lineage of accordion books, that they are descendents of Mesoamerican codices and other early book forms, to be an important fact to share with a group of student ambassadors he was working with in Southern California recently: "we talked about them being codices, where they're from, I kind of walked them through an uncovering of that. Like, 'What is this? What do you notice?' Using VTS [Visual Thinking Strategies] kind of showing them pictures from accordion books, that this is huge amounts of information, that it's the beginning of mathematics, all of these things and kind of showing them that this comes from the Yucatan and really helping them to connect with their own culture. Like, 'Oh, wow. These are the first books' in a lot of ways. They pre-date the printing press. So for them to then say, 'Now we're going make them,' they got so excited."

In addition to Derek's use of accordion books as a tool in his work teaching teachers and young people, he has found the practice to be useful in his own research work, specifically as an important source of ideas for the doctoral dissertation he is currently writing for Mills College. Derek asked his doctoral advisors if he could use his accordion books as primary sources



Figure 6.5 Excerpts from Derek Fenner’s personal accordion books.

in his auto-ethnography and was granted permission. Fenner explained, “I wanted to include 6–12 pages from my actual accordion books—to interrupt the flow of the dissertation with the flow of my actual mind. And that’s sort of the close read that I’m giving to it, is that, okay here’s a great time to talk about race and trauma [major themes in Derek’s work] but also here’s a great time to talk about a process that’s worked for me as a researcher. And also to represent my mind as closely as I can.”

Lastly, Derek Fenner has developed a strategy in his accordion books centered around the use of quotations from poets, academics, artists and even colleagues. Fenner uses these quotes as catalysts, or generative “springboards for deep dives.” Derek’s accordion books are filled with quotations from widely disparate sources—the cumulative or synergistic effect is that “it starts to create a cacophony, or like a story. It starts to create the things that actually make me who I am as a creative person, as a writer, as a scholar, and I think that it gives honor to the lineage and that which came before. So it’s been really important to me in terms of process.” This strategy of channeling the words of others is central to both Derek’s personal work as a writer and to his teaching. “So my notebooks have always been filled with the words of others because I, and again, I do this with the art-centered literacy stuff I do. It’s really important for us to find ourselves in the words of others. That’s a tool that builds empathy, which leads to solidarity.” Out of this quotation-based meaning making process, Derek has developed another accordion book strategy for himself and his students that he calls “a reverse method of citation” Fenner explains, “We teach citation in one way in this country, or, in most places. And that’s, “Come up with something that you want to say about this text, and then find the quote that backs it up. Well, what if we go into the text and we find something that moves us and then we say something about it? That’s often more personal, more valid, and actually more interesting.” Fenner’s personalization of accordion book practice, his adaptive and innovative pushing the limits of the form in both his personal work as a poet/visual artist/researcher and in his work as an educator of youth and other teachers is an exemplar of the accordion book as possibility space in teaching, learning and artistic practice.

### **6.10.2 Caren Andrews: Mapping Terrains, Getting Out of My Own Way, Exchange**

Caren Andrews is a visual artist and elementary school art teacher at an independent school in San Francisco CA. Like Derek Fenner, she was introduced to accordion book practice by Todd Elkin when they co-facilitated a course on assessment for teachers. Since then, Caren has developed a variety of innovative ways to use accordion books both in her work with students at the elementary school and with the teachers she continues to teach in the Integrated Learning Specialist Program in the San Francisco Bay Area. In her personal teaching practice, Andrews uses her own accordion book as a flexible tool to sequentially document the school year, house her ongoing overarching questions and document ongoing assessment “I also

make my notes on students so it's where my basic assessment is. I record either behavioral or artistic breakthroughs or challenges in here." And so, for Andrews, the accordion book becomes a teaching tool, a way of mapping, organizing and making visible the terrain of a given school year for a given group of learners.

In addition, Caren uses accordion books with both adults and elementary school learners as a site for exchange

"..the appeal to me for accordion books overall has always been that they stand up, that they break the two dimensional wall, so to speak, and they become a personal thinking wall. There are ways for one to be private about what's inside the books if one doesn't want to expose it to the general population. However, it's a great way for us to stand up our ideas and be able to look at them and exchange them. One of the strategies that's been great for me personally as an artist or as a teaching in the classroom studio setting is that we can steal like artists from one another. We can put the information out and without words look at each other's work very easily, and then find things that we like and integrate that into our own work as well as offer constructive criticism, feedback. "Have you considered?", "Would you try?", so that can happen from an idea point of view where I see an intellectual idea that I want to spiral out on, or a new way of integrating art materials into an accordion book." (C. Andrews, personal interview with Elkin, July 26, 2017).

For Andrews, the accordion book is a place for her young students to capture process. Here, Caren describes how accordion book practice is woven into her K-4th grade students' work " I start with accordion books in kindergarten, five year olds. I mostly work with accordion books with my kindergarten through fourth graders, the five to ten year olds. I use one accordion book per unit, and each grade level has I would say, on average, seven units that we cover per year. I build them for them in kindergarten when they first meet me, and then I teach them how to build their own afterwards using rhymes and storytelling to get them to get it internalized so that by the time they're in second grade, it's automatic. Usually it's earlier, but often they forget over summer and we have to go back through the folding in half and turning it into a W or wings or whatever it is that they've fixated on."

"The cover often is part of a two-minute warmup drawing that's connected to the curriculum. If it's about "how are artists scientists and artists at the





Figure 6.6 Excerpts from Caren Andrews accordion books.

same time?’, then the cover starts to become a Venn diagram about what scientists are and what artists and where those crossovers are. Then inside, it becomes the research that we’re doing about that project that’s investigating that bigger question that we’re getting smarter about. Again, at the end of the year, they aren’t all connected together because of that communication piece, but they’re all grouped together in the student’s process folio that ends up going home at the end of the school year with instructions to have the child set up a gallery walk for the parents and have them walk through. I also have a script of questions for them to ask about the process so that again, it’s not always just about which projects they liked the most and how it turned out beautiful or whatever it is. You’re trying to train the parents into focusing on the importance of the thinking and developing a, using Kimberly D’Adamo’s words, a ‘thinking studio, not an art studio.’” (Marshall, 2011)

Finally, Andrews tells of a particularly powerful exchange with one of her fourth grade students, whom we will call A. This anecdote, we think, illustrates how reflective engagement with accordion books can help learners “*get out of their own way*”:

“A was one of those elementary students that if not engaged, would run around the room and poke other students, get in their business and start to irritate in order to get attention. I knew that about A. I’d been teaching her for at least four years. I gave her my accordion book for that school year. I asked her to look for two things. I gave her two sticky notes. (Figure 6.6) I asked her to list out *what did she see*, and I asked her to look for *what was missing or what was needed*. She sat there. I teach in 45-minute blocks, so this was probably a 20-minute block that she was engaged in my accordion book, really taking the challenge seriously. At the end, what she saw and the response to, “What do you see?” was *‘life, art, a light bulb, telling a story, your passion, the brain, and how life is a big*

*question.*' Now some of this she literally saw. She literally saw a light bulb. There's a light bulb image, and some of these things she was extrapolating, like '*how life is a big question*'. I have a lot of question marks in my book. I don't have this question written out, how life is a big question. She wasn't copying that. There's an image of a brain, but there's no image of my passion. How do you make an image?"

"That was fascinating to me as an adult working with a then nine year old, how she was moving back and forth between the literal and her going from what she was seeing to what she was thinking about and what then she was wondering. Then, her response to what was missing was fascinating. She found that what was missing was '*what I like to do*', the '*what else about me besides art?*', which was referring to my going higher up your idea tree. The other thing that she said was missing was "firepower" When I asked her, "A, what do you mean by firepower?" I do remember, she was in third grade at the time. "Firepower is sort of like what happens with clay: it changes and transforms as we work with it. Clay starts as soft. Its first transformation is when the clay dries out, becoming brittle and fragile. The clay transforms again when it's fired and becomes hard and strong. Clay has the potential to transform again and again by adding layers of glazes. When artwork has firepower, it has transformed completely from the starting idea, the idea the artwork has layers. Firepower is also *when the artwork crafted pops with strength and story*. You know, it's like readable."

This deep and impressive dialogic exchange was made possible by Caren Andrews sharing her accordion book with 9 year old A and asking her to interact with it. Afterwards the idea of "FirePower" became common parlance between A, Caren and A's classmates. Caren has "kept the term alive" as a metaphor in assessment : "The part about having an artwork crafted popping with strength and story can be both the visual elements that I'm looking for in assessing or self-assessment of artwork as well as the ideas behind the artwork. I think that that's why I continue to use the term "firepower" with that specific definition." We see Caren's centering of accordion book practice as an innovative paradigm of how the affordances of accordion books can add depth to teaching and learning.

### 6.10.3 Devika G: Things Talk to Me, Mapping Terrains, Getting Out of My Own Way

Devika is 20 years old and a scholarship student at the Srishti Institute of Art Design and Technology in Bangalore. She is also a youth facilitator with the placeARTs Youth Collective, an activist youth group that designs and implements community based art projects. Devika's primary languages are Telugu and Kannada and she has begun to learn English only recently. Devika began making accordion books as a middle school student of Arzu Mistry at the Drishya Kalika Kendra, a learning center for Urban Poor youth. She continues to make and keep her own accordion books today as a third year college student. She calls them *memory books* and keeps accordion books and flip books instead of regular note books. She has begun to seek inspiration by following artists she is intrigued by. Devika shares that her reasons for using accordion books goes beyond just an aesthetic choice. As a new English Language Learner, she finds it easier to share her ideas through a combination of words and drawings.

“I started learning English very late. So I was not able to write a proper sentence or a phrase so it was easy for me to draw it. It was easy to take whatever sentence was in my head, and show it rather than talking about it. I do not feel more confident when I talk in English or write in English so I started using these journals and paper as my medium to share whatever was on my mind.” (G, Devika, personal interview with Mistry, August 15, 2017).

Devika enjoys making books and has many different kinds of books that she makes and keeps but she speaks specifically about the versatility of accordion books. Besides being easy to make, Devika enjoys that accordion books because they can be small and transportable. She says “size matters but if you want to work big you can create a flap or extension, turn the book sideways and draw across multiple pages.” In her other books she is restricted to size. “This book is like a mind map. You start with one topic with the bigger book and then you go to another topic where I have made a smaller book within the book. And then you just read about only that story. You do not get confused with everything else.”

Devika also talks about how keeping accordion books makes her very happy. She says “I never get tired of working in these books. I am always trying to be creative in my books.” Devika articulates that the aesthetic dimension of her book makes her look at other artist's work and builds her

creative inquiry practice, She says “people come and ask me how did you make this and I go and ask people how did you make this? This way I am creating relationships . . . my books make it easier for me to understand. All my books are for myself not some third person. I write in English and Kannada and just one word and one image helps me understand the whole knowledge of that day.”

Devika shared one of her accordion books where she focused on observation. (Figure 6.7 left) “I have started drawing what I see and then I let my imagination take over . . . this is a hut I was looking at but then I started colouring only one part and taking it into a tree. So adding my imagination to reality.” These images still function as triggers to Devika about what she observed and also as metaphors for where her thinking grew from her observations. In Figure 6.7 (right) we see another page from a recent accordion book of Devika’s. The page has some drawing, collage, natural objects and



**Figure 6.7** Pages from two of Devika’s accordion books.

text. Devika shares a story about a night walk she had gone on that had huge impact on her. She saw multiple scorpions as she pointed her U.V flashlight at a pile of leaves. This ‘things talk to me’ moment was significant and emotional for Devika and she captures it here with the scorpion tails and leaves she has drawn. The circular image represents Devika’s experiments with soil chromatography at an art/science workshop she attended. Below the circle she has text that documents the process, materials and directions. She has gone back into the image and layered it with white lines. This is the beginning of a map of Devika’s experiments with wanting to understand a place in a deeper way. The chromatography in itself is a map of the soil.

While Mistry was looking at this page together with Devika, she expressed some frustrations about the process that has value to our discussion here. Devika was concerned that her accordion book looked too much like Mistry’s

“I don’t want my books to look like yours. The thing is I have grown with you as a student and artist so it will happen whenever you grow with someone who is older than you you will take inspiration and use it in your work. But then even if you don’t feel that you are copying them, others tell you. So many people said that you have a style of Arzu akka. I am glad but after a point I do not want it to happen. So I took inspiration from you not only in my books but in the way I talk, write or think about space design and then I mix it up and find my own way to start working towards it.”

Devika expresses that she had been trying to break away and develop her own strategies in her books and she does not like the similarities between the look and feel of her books and her former teacher’s. This conversation was important to have and one that Arzu has had with many teachers and students. She encourages everyone to copy ideas from each other and through the process make the ideas their own. Arzu responded to Devika by showing her the ways in which she was in fact innovating, branching off in her own individual ways, both in form and content. She also guided her to other artists she could take inspiration from. Like the dialogues between Caren Andrews and her student A, Mistry’s conversations with Devika highlight the many ways accordion books can be a hub of teaching, learning and art-centered inquiry.

## 6.11 Some Challenges to Accordion Book Methodologies

Like any pedagogical methodology new to one, and especially a methodology that may go against the grain of past and current orthodoxy, accordion book practice may present challenges to those new to it:

Some learners and teachers not used to being invited to be the drivers of their own learning or to document and share their emergent processes (because this invitation has not traditionally been extended to them in their other learning environments) are reluctant, hesitant and sometimes unable to see the relevance of this kind of shift in learning/practice. This is due in large measure to learners' and teachers' general feeling of disempowerment often fostered by systemic compliance-based models of teaching and learning that do not encourage teacher or learner agency.

Students skilled at strategically "playing the school game" or delivering to the teacher precisely what is required to get the top grade, are not necessarily authentically engaging in accordion book practice, because they are not yet "doing it for their own reasons". Accordion book practice is most powerful when the inquiry, exploration, mapping, connection making, critical examination and revisiting is driven by the learner's own interests and is occurring in interstitial spaces between disciplines and students lives.

It can be challenging for teachers to stay consistent with accordion book practice, in other words to come back to it on a regular consistent basis. If teachers drop the ball, or fail to recursively create space for meaning making in and through accordion books in an ongoing way, they run the risk of sending a message to students that this practice is really not that important or valuable. For this practice to really take hold teachers must encourage the ongoing revisiting of accordion books-they must encourage a practice that will go beyond one's school day or school year, or even one's school life. In this way, accordion book practice can be processed and tracked over the course of years.

For some, a shift even occurs that one's accordion book practice/inquiry *is* the core and the classes one attends are just additions to one's core practice.

Many learners, both adult and young people, worry excessively about about their accordion books looking good. The anxiety of the blank page arises for many. Both Mistry and Elkin convey the message to their students that "copying is cool" and that "stealing is allowed and even encouraged". The goal is that learners eventually and organically get to a place of authentic and idiosyncratic skill – that they develop mastery that is self motivated and idiosyncratic versus one that is imposed upon them.

## 6.12 Conclusion

We have seen a great deal of evidence that accordion book practice supports the development of agency in teachers/learners/artists and is linked to an increased responsiveness to the world, a motivation to inquire and is a catalyst for developing ongoing inquiries and further practice. We've seen accordion book processes "jump start" the engine of self-directed learning in both adults and young people. As "sites of captured reflection" we've seen accordion books become a seed, a path, a constant place to revisit and move forward. We conclude, below, with some of the possibility spaces opening up for ourselves as a result of our personal continued engagement with accordion book practice. Our personal art-centered-research quests as teachers and artists have developed in parallel with the accordion book project as we practice keeping our own accordion books and work with others to keep their own.

There are different and often concurrent levels at which accordion book practice functions as art-centered research. We've witnessed examples of teachers and students separately but in parallel ways engaging in individual/personal lines of inquiry using accordion book practice and then engage in dialogue about each other's findings. Teachers' and students' inquiries thus have the potential to inform each other and suggest new individual and collaborative avenues for further research/learning. Examples shared here of Derek Fenner and Caren Andrews are just a small sampling of the work of many other educators and young people we have worked with. The cycles of noticing, gathering, sorting, analyzing, reflecting, coding, theorizing, developing new inquiries are a deeply personal and in-depth form of research. We see a great many possibilities in this type of arts-centered research. We will continue to publish and share exemplars of the innovations happening in accordion book practice.

Finally, although we have been engaged in the various processes outlined in this chapter for over 10 years now, as individual practitioners, collaboratively, and as educators of young people and other teachers, we feel that we are in many ways just beginning to explore the possibilities of accordion book practice. We are continually informed by the innovations of fellow teachers, artists and our younger students who have embraced accordion book practice and taken it in directions we would not have otherwise imagined.

Arzu Mistry has over the years been struggling with finding the fluid balance point and intersection of being an artist and teacher. Across her accordion books over the past many years, this challenge continues to



**Figure 6.8** The Artist/Teacher I am.

surface in different ways and her inquiry still persists. She finds herself often replaying a conversation she had with her college professor who warned her that she could be a good artist or a good teacher but she would have to choose and she could not be both. Arzu has struggled to resist this dichotomy of artist or teacher for close to 20 years now. From 2014–2016 she engaged in an in-depth process of co-creating, designing, hand-binding, printing and publishing an artist book about the accordion book practice. Throughout the making of *Unfolding Practice; Reflections on Learning and Teaching* she grappled with how the process and product ‘was art’ or ‘was about art’, as a lot of teaching is ‘about’ something else and rarely *is* the practice itself. There are points in the artist book where she feels successful in overcoming this dichotomy, and other points where she feels she failed to find that sweet spot. Therefore this inquiry is not resolved as yet and continues. As she grapples with this inquiry in her own practice, Mistry looks out at other practitioners



like Joseph Beuys and Tania Bruguera for inspiration and simultaneously seeks opportunities to test the boundaries of this inquiry in her own teaching and artist practice. In a recent accordion book where Mistry has been inquiring into the artistry of facilitation and is engaging in the learning process of being a ‘joker’ in a Theatre for Living process for community dialogue, she reflects “Calm this analytical mind. It has stopped dancing. It only seems to be digging, poking, and unraveling. Just ‘be’ for a bit and create with fluidity not tightness.” This inquiry exemplifies many aspects of the accordion book practice, from *getting lost* to *getting out of my own way* to *what would an artist do*. Mistry continues to use and reuse the strategies she and Elkin have developed through the accordion book practice in pursuit of an inquiry that is vital to her practice as a teacher and artist.

Todd Elkin, in his role as a high school art teacher, has been exploring various ways in which practices of teaching, accordion book processes, qualitative research, critical pedagogy and contemporary art strategies can merge. In addition, Elkin has been looking for ways that a fluidity between process and product can be achieved. A recent project, **Assessment as Dialogue** embodied these efforts.

Elkin had become increasingly dissatisfied with the fact that assessment in almost all public school classrooms travels in just one direction, from teacher to learner. In *Teachers As Cultural Workers*, Paulo Freire discusses the traditional practice of teachers’ “Reading a class of students as though it were a text to be decoded” (Freire 2005) and then goes on to envision classrooms where students reciprocate, “observing the gestures, language . . . and behavior of teachers”. Of course, students are already doing this all the time-however they are not typically invited to share the results of these “readings” with their teachers or with each other. With these ideas as starting



Figure 6.9 Assessment as Dialogue.

points, *Assessment as Dialogue* involved 30 High School students employing various analytic strategies and lenses to strike an assessment balance with an English Language Arts teacher whom they all shared. Utilizing accordion book strategies and other methods drawn from Critical Discourse Analysis, Relational Installation Art/Socially Engaged/Participatory Artistic practice and Qualitative Research and informed by the writings of Michel Foucault, Paulo Freire, Jeff Duncan-Andrade, bell hooks and other practitioners of Critical Pedagogy, students observed and unpacked verbal, nonverbal, written and digital communications produced by their teacher, all the while engaging in dialogue with him around their findings. The students used accordion books to collect, document, code and analyze their findings. A new qualitative research tool was thus invented specifically for this project, The Graphic Memo, consisting of each student's accordion book with all of its attendant gathering, sorting, coding, and analyzing strategies in play. Throughout, the teacher being assessed seized upon this opportunity to reflect upon his own practice. In addition, the students created an ongoing process-illuminating interactive art installation at a San Francisco contemporary art museum which also featured a series of public dialogues between stakeholders within their teaching/learning community and interested people from the wider Bay Area community. This Project began in classrooms at Washington High School in Fremont California and subsequently moved across the Bay where it became a dialogically driven installation at the 2014 **Bay Area Now** exhibit at the **Yerba Buena Center For The Arts** in San Francisco. This iterative art exhibit resembled a gallery sized accordion book, with the primary difference being that the students were continually focusing, reframing, highlighting, curating and re-presenting different aspects of their dialogic research findings on the gallery walls. For Elkin, *Assessment As Dialogue*, presented some promising ways forward in how accordion book practice can be situated within hybrid spaces of relevant transdisciplinary inquiries, teaching and learning and contemporary art practice.

In closing we would like to reiterate that accordion book practice has as much value for all learners be they teachers or students. We firmly believe that students and teachers need to develop and take ownership of a rigorous *practice*. This practice is not for school, or parents, or teachers or for a future job, this practice is for oneself. It is a practice one is passionate about and becomes the driver for continued learning. The philosophical base of accordion book practice as articulated in this chapter, fits seamlessly with the processes and strategies described. The microcosm is reflected in the

macrocosm where an everyday practice is reflected in the very being and doing of the proactive and engaged artist and inquirer who is pursuing it. Olivia Gude in her talk on Art Education for Democratic Life says:

“How does this engaged, aware person participate in a democratic society? First, the artistically engaged individual couples intense awareness with a strong sense of agency, a belief that he or she can shape the world. This belief in the average person’s creative power lies at the root of any democratic society. As democratic citizens, we must believe that what we do affects the world around us, that what we do makes a difference.” (p. 1)

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