

The Provocation Collection: Experiential Learning Activities to Enliven Creative Practice & Inspire Innovations in Writing

Sheryda Warrenner, Lecturer, School of Creative Writing

Material Encounters

The goal of this two-year project is to design experiential learning activities in collaboration with visual artists for the creative writing classroom. This series of what I’m calling provocations will shift the focus of learning from an exclusively mental effort (lecture, workshop) toward a sequence of embodied, sensory-rich experiences, creating the conditions for poem-making. When language is defamiliarized through interdisciplinary play, students come to know their medium as a painter knows colour, or a ceramicist knows clay, that is, they deepen their understanding of language as material, freeing up the necessary space for singular expressions to flourish. These provocations, made in collaboration with students, artists, and arts-based educators, will form an online exhibition and open educational resource.

Defining “Provocation”

The word “provocation” is borrowed from the Reggio Emilia Approach to early childhood education; the history of prompt as provocation is part of a broader visual-textual culture, as art object and poetic form, as in surrealist exercises, fluxus scores, Yoko Ono’s ongoing series of *Instructions for Paintings*, and *Oblique Strategies* by Brian Eno & Peter Schmidt. Material exploration as a poetic practice is rooted in the experimental feminist craft practices of Anni Albers, Eva Hesse, Ruth Asawa, and Sheila Hicks. Through the testing phase, we have come to define a provocation as a pedagogical tool that prioritizes a material encounter; heightens attention to physical sensation; balances constraint with open-endedness; and stimulates imagination, curiosity, associative thinking, and the conditions for creative work. When these qualities are present, profound learning outcomes are achieved.

SPOTLIGHT: Holly Schmidt’s *Forecasting*

I invited visual artist Holly Schmidt to design a provocation in relationship with her multi-year residency at the Belkin Gallery. We shared her provocation with students in my course, *Thinking and Writing Through Art*; the poetic texts generated in response were displayed on the gallery’s clerestory windows, and will be published by the Belkin.



Forecasting, Holly Schmidt

As part of Vegetal Encounters, my multi-year residency with the UBC Outdoor Art Program, I decided to cultivate a practice of attentiveness to the weather and its impact on the natural world. As part of this practice, I spend time on campus sitting still, attending to the weather and its effect on my body and immediate surroundings, including the plants, animals, insects, birds, and all the other than human beings on campus. I jot down observations, make drawings, and map out relationships.

These notations are transformed into a series of seasonal forecasts that appear on a rotating basis in the clerestory windows of the Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery and the Centre for Interactive research on Sustainability. The forecasts are presented in a mirrored vinyl that reflects the changing weather conditions and the reader of the text. The reflection acts as a reminder of how we are all implicated in making the weather.



INVITATION

1. Visit a natural environment where you feel comfortable sitting and noticing for an hour: a public garden, a shoreline, a forested area.
2. Take notes by hand, in a notebook, observing the effects of the weather on human and other-than-human bodies.
3. Root your notes in hyper-local sensory observations, previous experiences, imaginative speculation, and occasionally some research. Be specific about the effects of the weather but vague about the timing of the occurrence.
4. Generate predictions 1 - 2 sentences in length of seasonal weather conditions, drawing on the phrasing and grammar of a standard weather forecast: “we are calling for”, “this pattern will”, “we can anticipate”, etc.
5. Pair your favourite prediction with a photograph that is directly or indirectly related to the observations.

Refining Reflection Questions

Each provocation is facilitated in small group workshops with students at the undergraduate and graduate levels, and with varying experience in poetry. Our current evaluative practice includes a follow-up conversation about process. We shaped the following questions as we went:

- What do these material experiences evoke?
- What emerges about practice and process?
- How does material experimentation impact language as material and medium?
- How does material experimentation / sensory experience impact attentiveness?
- How does material experimentation impact the frame of mind, mood, attitude toward making?

Meaningful Discoveries

In the next year, as I continue to collaborate with artists and students, I aim to link provocations more intentionally to learning outcomes, creating encounters with foundational poetic concepts that defy easy understanding: the potency of ambiguity and not-knowing; gaps and leaps in metaphor; defamiliarization; and the limits and capacities of language as material. In keeping with its experimental origins, I’m committed to making provocations that inspire a sense of play, collaboration, and opportunities for connection.

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