



# SHOW + TELL:

## Alternative Narratives through Collaborative Artwork

by Rachael Delaney, Christine Loehr, and Jesse Bott

*I brought in dirt because I like to plant with my sister and we have poppies.* – Fourth-Grade Student

*My mom gave this to me, it was so special to her.* – Third-Grade Student

*My spoon is so special to me because I eat yogurt with it every single day.* – Second-Grade Student

*Show + Tell* is a collaborative artwork created by 700 elementary school students, two elementary school art teachers, and a college art education professor. *Show + Tell* began with the premise that student thinking can be made visible by using the aesthetics of truth to raise criticality (Thompson, 2004). What we mean by the aesthetics of truth concerns those visual codes that suggest to the viewer honesty and

truthfulness, a believability that does not need to be questioned. Within our schools, these visual codes took the forms of graphs, pie charts, progress reports, growth models, spreadsheets, and flow charts that made factual claims about student achievement as consistently underperforming. In response to the certainty of the data, each of our schools made it a priority to improve achievement scores as a way

to turn deficiency into proficiency. Unfortunately, instead of raising criticality, our schools reduced the distinctiveness of student thinking down to impersonal numerical achievement scores. We knew that our schools were more than the accumulation of data, and we wondered if this same data could be visually manipulated to include the not-so-quantifiable humanity of our students



that we experience everyday. *Show + Tell* became our opportunity to intervene and reveal a more honest and compelling portrait of our schools.

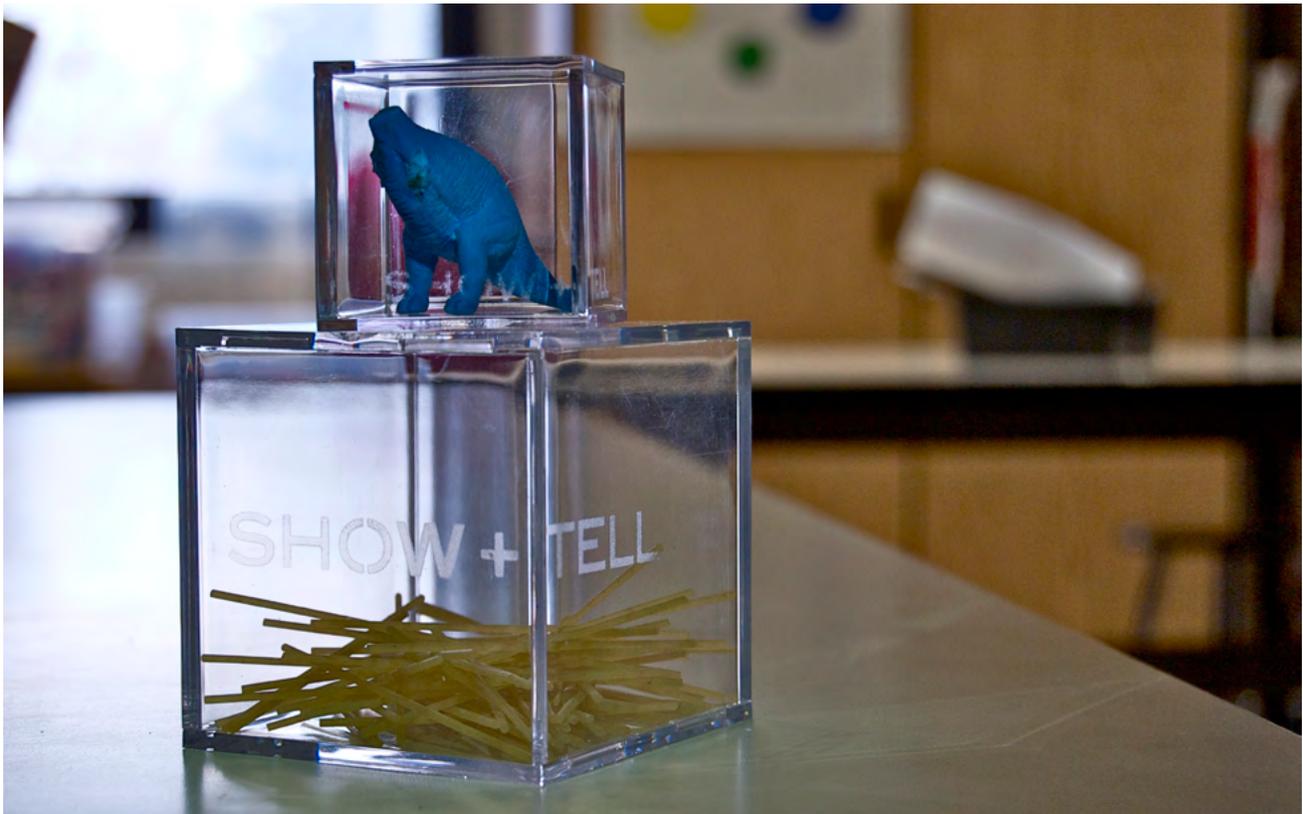
We began our research for *Show + Tell* by asking ourselves: How can we create a collaborative work of art that emphasizes the value of our students' lived experiences? And how can we call attention to the role of standardization in stigmatizing and misleading perceptions of an entire school community? To effectively answer these questions, we knew that we had to replace the immediacy of data with complexity and ambiguity through meaning-making. As described by Wiggins and McTighe (2011), meaning-making involves active intellectual work to make sense of a big idea and its implications "through processes of inquiry, inferencing, and rethinking" (p.63) because "meaning is not so much 'taught and learned' as 'challenged and constructed'" (p.103). *Show + Tell* offered us the opportunity to expose preconceived notions about our schools through the practice of making, to visually challenge the label of "underperforming school." Our intentions were to construct alternative perspectives by showcasing our students' curiosity, creativity, and engagement with the world through objects and narratives.

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This article describes the development, construction, and exhibition of a collaborative work of art using objects and narratives informed by the lives and interests of our students. Rachael Delaney offers an overview of the project and describes how working collectively meant relying on the expertise of students to facilitate meaning-making. Christine Loehr shares the impact this collaborative process had on her professional development. Jesse Bott provides examples of student narratives and describes how those stories allowed him to have a deeper understanding of his students' lived experiences.

### **The Germination of an Idea by Rachael Delaney**

Contemporary art played an important role during the development of this project through examples of artwork that critically examined and responded to important issues happening now (Mayer, 2008). In 2008, the artist J. Morgan Puett created a large-scale participatory installation work called *Department (Store): A Collaboration with J. Morgan Puett*. The work was created to accompany the opening of the Sullivan Galleries at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. One hundred twenty-one (121) glass department store display cases were rented on a first-come-first-serve basis to individuals interested in putting something on display. Participants were asked: What is important? What is the statement you would make? And how would you display it? (Moore, 2008) Contributions to the display cases included bric-a-brac, piles of clothing, giant candelabras, ceramic bowls, dolls, and, in some instances, the participants climbed into the cases and put themselves on display. With this work, Puett was able to contrast the act of display as a



means to generalize and simplify information with display as a means to contextualize information as complex and evolving.

Pruett's distinction seemed to be at the heart of what was concerning us as educators: We wanted to do more than merely display student work. We wanted the opportunity to make the complexity of students' meaning-making visible. During our first brainstorming meeting about *Show + Tell*, I shared *Department (Store)* with Christine Loehr and Jesse Bott and wondered, with them, how the format of our exhibition could present an alternative to the highly managed proficiency ratings and how could it question the negative generalizations this type of data can have on a community. While we agreed that the display case seemed to be an ideal format, it was also important to us to not duplicate *Department (Store)*. We wanted to borrow from the concepts in the work to create an original artwork that had students "examining, reflecting, questioning and responding to the important issues of their world" (Mayer, 2008, p.78). Christine Loehr and Jesse Bott agreed to begin the process of collecting, cataloging, and storing the small objects that the students brought in while I researched material costs and found funding sources for the project.

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We decided that simple acrylic cubes (the type typically used to store and protect memorabilia like autographed baseballs) would function as display cases for our project. The cost of approximately 900 acrylic cubes, one for each student, was close to \$2,000. A successful Kickstarter campaign allowed us to move forward with the project. Once the shipment of acrylic boxes arrived, we spent many hours in my garage packing each of these boxes with an object and stenciling onto the exterior of each box the words "Show + Tell." As they were collecting objects, Christine Loehr and Jesse Bott meticulously cataloged each item that came into their classrooms ascribing a number to each object that was a combination of the student's grade level and the ranking of the student's school. This number was then applied to the exterior of the box.



Along with the objects, Christine Loehr and Jesse Bott also collected test scores for reading, writing, and math; the hours per week devoted to instruction focused on each of these content areas; and the hours per week devoted to visual arts instruction. They also included in their data the gender, ethnicity, and age of each student along with their English Language Learner designation. I then took this information and handwrote the data into a ledger; student names were replaced with the same number that was put on the outside of the box. This step ensured the anonymity of the students involved in the project while also allowing a viewer of the artwork to look up the data on a student in the ledger and then find the corresponding display cube holding the object that the student selected to include in the exhibition. The final element of the piece was a recording of each student describing what the student had brought in for *Show + Tell* and why the object was important to the student. As each element of the project came together, we grew more confident in the artwork and its ability to poetically present a complex portrait of our students.

Structuring the project around the stuff of our students' everyday life was a choice we made because of the potential for these familiar objects to cultivate an understanding of our students as contributors to their communities and not just underperforming learners. As described by Gude (2007), "the essential contribution that arts education can make to our students and to our communities is to teach skills and concepts while creating opportunities to investigate and represent one's own experiences—generating personal and shared meaning" (p. 6). By asking our students to curate the objects and stuff of their lives, we asked them to become the interpreters of the project, responsible for the aesthetic investigations and meaning-making. This allowed us to take on the role of facilitator so we could be attentive to the process of producing the work; we immersed ourselves in the qualities of the learning experience and paid attention to the possibilities, promise, and actualities of our exchanges with our students and each other (O'Donoghue, 2015).

## **Sustaining Professional Growth and Cultivating Relationships by Christine Loehr**

I have always known that teaching art was my passion and I had promised myself that I would never be the teacher who gets bored or loses passion for the craft. However, 10 years of increasing isolation and few art education professional development opportunities had whittled away at the promise I made to myself to always be the engaged and curious teacher. I was in the need of a creative surge and, fortunately, this came in the form of a student teacher, Jesse Bott.

During Jesse's time at Rose Hill Elementary, we seamlessly integrated our similar pedagogical philosophies, each from our own separate experiences. As a new teacher, Jesse was very interested in finding ways to sustain his practice as an artist, something I had lost sight of over the years as lesson plans replaced my own creative practice as a sculptor. With two distinct vantage points, we created our own professional learning community (PLC). A key attribute of our PLC was shared leadership (Owen, 2014). We worked as a team using inquiry to experiment with different teaching strategies. We shared lesson-planning ideas, honestly discussed areas for improvement, and engaged in reflective dialog at the end of every school day. Our mutual respect for each other allowed us to learn together uninhibited so we could focus our collaborative efforts on improving student learning. At the end of a nine-week, whirlwind art frenzy, Rose Hill and I had to say goodbye to Jesse. Luckily for us, Jesse was soon hired at Monaco Elementary just minutes away; our collaboration was to continue as district colleagues. I share this history because it demonstrates how transformative a professional collaborative partnership can be, and suggests the level of trust already established between collaborating art educators well before *Show + Tell* was conceived.

While working with the students and their *Show + Tell* objects, I was reminded of how important teachers are in the lives of their students. With each item donated to the project, I was entrusted with my students' treasures and secrets. As a result of this project, my students spoke freely about their families, cultures, and communities because

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they trusted me. Students brought in items that reminded them of their parents who were in jail or family members who had been deported.

The 300 stories that came with each donated object reminded me of how privileged I am and that, when kids are given the opportunity to be listened to, they feel honored and treasured themselves. As artists, we all know the power an impactful work of art can have on a viewer and, after 10 years of teaching, I was reminded of the importance of not taking this for granted in my own classroom. As a result of this project, I now try to include opportunities in every assignment for new and unexpected collaborative experiences so students can think about making in different and surprising ways. I have also become more attentive to my own practice as an artist by making and submitting artwork to local juried arts shows.

## **Challenges, Possibilities, and Hope: Charting the Stories of Students by Jesse Bott**

When we began *Show + Tell*, I was a new teacher trying to navigate my second year of teaching. It was both exciting and unnerving to participate in such a large-scale project where I would be responsible for ensuring that my students' heritage, struggles, joys, pride, and accomplishments would be accurately represented. My first concern was figuring out how to present this idea to students to begin the collection process without disrupting the projects already in progress. I decided to keep the process as simple as possible, making it a side project or homework. I announced to my students

that we were going to be working on a personal art project that I was developing with two colleagues and that we needed the students as collaborative partners in order to complete the work.

I showed my students a coffee filter I brought from home to represent my love and need for coffee. On the coffee filter, I had drawn a picture of my house to illustrate how grateful I am to have a safe place to go every day. I also brought in a section of a graph that documented the heart rates of my pregnant wife and my unborn son. My aim in sharing these two items was to show students that there are a variety of ways of using objects to show and tell what is important in one's life.

*Show + Tell* objects rolled in slowly. One kindergartner brought in a bag of dried spaghetti noodles, another brought in a couple of toys he used to play with when he was a baby, and a fourth grader brought in a bag full of dirt. As the weeks progressed, more students brought in objects and my boxes marked with the different grade levels began filling up.

Similarly, my audio recorder was filling up with the students' narratives. I started to fully understand the purpose and the potential of this project as I listened to the stories of my students. The kindergarten student who brought in spaghetti said he simply wanted to show his need for food to stay alive, and that spaghetti happened to be his favorite food for doing this. The fourth-grade girl who brought in a bag of dirt told me that it came from the garden where she and her grandma spent time in the summers. A third-grade girl brought in three pieces of dog food, each one representing one of her dogs. Listening to their stories provided me with a more complete understanding of who my students were. I learned more about their lives outside of school than I had learned in my entire first year of teaching. I didn't know until he donated it to this project that a second-grade boy's last gift from his mom before she went to jail was a necklace, or that the sole purpose of a second-grade girl was to grow up to become a doctor because her family had experienced some serious medical difficulties. Together, these objects documented moments of joy, sadness, frustration, worry, and hope, informed by the past, with aspirations

for the future. This complexity is what makes us human. *Show + Tell* connected my students' actual concerns to the broader implications of assessments, promoting transformative learning for each of us through an authentic collaborative experience (Campbell, 2011).

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I believe that working on this project altered my students' perception and understanding of my intentions as their art teacher. Being new to the school, I was cautious and so were my students. *Show + Tell* generated trust through a very unassuming process of sharing objects and stories. A bond was created, easing student uncertainty about what was going to happen in the art room, opening the door for more genuine exchanging of ideas and collaboration. While working on the project, I was constantly reminded of an interview question I was asked when I was applying for my job. The principal wanted to know how I would approach whole-child instruction in my classroom. In my answer, I remembered saying that I wanted to help students learn to build relationships by including their interests in their art making. *Show + Tell* gave me the opportunity to follow through on this statement in a way that I had not been able to do prior to the project.

### **The Exhibition**

As we worked on the project, we tested out different formats for exhibiting the work. Eventually, we decided that stacking the transparent cubes on top of one another would emphasize the dimensionality of the objects and, as one sculptural mass, would have the strongest visual impact. We wanted viewers to be able to walk around the stacked cases to explore each object individually and collectively.



We installed the cubes on a 4'x8' platform, staggering our stacking of the cubes to create different heights. At the opening, an audio recording of the students discussing their work played in the background and, on a pedestal near the stack of cubes, was the ledger filled with the data for each student. It was exciting to experience the work with those who attended the opening – students and teachers from both schools and one principal – and to discuss with them our intentions: resisting the definition of our schools as “underperforming” by demonstrating the complexity of our students’ meaning-making.

### **Learning through Experience**

As educators frustrated by the overemphasis our schools placed on test scores, *Show + Tell* became our point of clarity. When we agreed to participate in the project, none of us really understood

the level of commitment it was going to take to complete the work. We were rather surprised to find ourselves installing the finished work in the gallery because there were times when the project seemed too big for the three of us to accomplish. But each time we put an object into a box for display, our connection to each student as an individual deepened, reminding us that the aims of education must reach beyond standardization. We learned for ourselves the value of prioritizing experience and reflecting on accomplishments. As stated by Dewey (1916), “when we experience something we act upon it, we do something with it” (p. 139). *Show + Tell* called on us to act on other ways of making with our students and, because of this, “a change made in us”(p. 139) was the result of learning how to cultivate a culture of collaboration as a means for creating deeper connections with our students.

## Conclusion

*Show + Tell* places as its central aim the recognition of the lived experience of our students as critical to the practice of learning; it stands as a visual metaphor for the ways in which multiple perspectives are shared and linked. As educators and artists, we were initially attempting to demonstrate how performance scores do little to provide a robust and complex portrait of a learner and a school because they assess using a single perspective that does little to uncover complexity. During the process of making this work, our conversations often drifted to our habits in the classroom, those that we thought worked and those that we knew we could do better. These reflective moments gave us the opportunity to develop new awareness about our daily instructional habits so new possibilities could be imagined in our own classrooms (Buffington & Wilson McKay, 2013). We became better educators because of this collaboration.

Our shared belief that a comprehensive school performance score can be built using more than just a set of data points became manifest through our students' voices and objects. Through this collaboration with our students, we challenged the "structural objectification and neutrality of knowledge" (Shin, 2013, p. 106) to actively defy presumptions about our communities. If assessment is to be successful as an indicator of growth, then it must be as dynamic as those it is assessing. *Show + Tell* was our attempt to create such a dynamic assessment: we tell an alternative narrative of two underperforming schools by *showing* who our students are through a collaborative artwork.

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