

Research Findings

“Embracing Wonder and Curiosity: Transforming Teacher Practice Through Escape Room Design”

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Working with the Design X Cohort, we attended two sessions at the RVS offices in September, 2017. We considered what could be possible for students and teachers; exploring curriculum through puzzles, locks and cyphers. This group of teachers participated in several user experiences both in and out of their school, starting with the escape room. They were supported by several district learning specialists who facilitated the process through questions and experiences. I thought about wonder and curiosity and became interested in how teachers took up the work of escape rooms within their own practice, particularly thinking about how this might change how they saw curriculum. Were students confined by how learning took place? Were teachers? What would it mean to teach from a place of wonder and curiosity? Would it take hold in a teacher’s practice that might transform their teaching? How might this evolve? We set out to understand the lived experience of five teachers who were considering escape rooms in their practice through a phenomenological approach (van Manen, 1997) and how these experiences may transform their practice as teachers.

Our initial findings were presented at the Canadian Society for Studies in Education in May, 2018. The following is from our presentation:

Game Play

“Come, we shall have some fun now!” thought Alice. “I’m glad they’ve begun asking riddles—I believe I can guess that,” she added aloud (Carol, 2006, p. 54).

We invited the participants of the Design X cohort to participate in two conversations with us after they had completed their projects in December; one in January and the other in May. We wanted to keep the phenomenological nature of our research at the forefront, desiring a reflection of the work that involved both us and the teachers, wanting to learn with them (Weber, 1986). We were interested to see what remnants of the design experience remained for the teachers and if they had or considered continuing to utilize any aspects of the experience and why, particularly the phenomenon of wonder and curiosity. Of the twenty, five accepted our request. Two were French Immersion teachers, Anne and Tina (pseudonyms) from an elementary school. Both had been teaching a relatively short time, six years and three, but were well-versed in Inquiry-based teaching and learning; always looking for ways to break free of the more traditional ways of teaching in Immersion settings. They had partnered their grade two and five classrooms to explore content in social studies. They both embraced a design thinking approach to pedagogy but had never applied it through an escape room before. Originally, only Anne had attended the first professional learning session and experienced the mobile escape room. She was excited by the possibilities for learning and, upon returning to the school, had recruited a fellow teacher, Tina, to join her. We spoke of their teaching experiences, especially those that involved hands-on approaches such as makerspace,

A: The kids have used reflection journals and we would use them (for formative assessment) every time; that was good. I think I was saying, “we are also excited about learning in a different way.” Same with them. When we tried the makerspace, they’re so excited. They then put everything away and took a step back... they were thinking what they liked about this part or that game we tried, what was working well...

The word, excited, was one that was repeated often in our conversation. We considered it etymologically, excite (v.)mid-14c., "to move, stir up, instigate," from Old French *esciter* (12c.) or directly from Latin *excitare* "rouse, call out, summon forth, produce," frequentative of *excire* "call forth, instigate," from *ex* "out" (see *ex-*) + *ciere* "set in motion, call" (from PIE root **keie-* "to set in motion"). (<https://www.etymonline.com>, 2018).

We began to think about what was being, "stirred up or instigated"? We wondered how it might apply to escape rooms. Tina continues,

T: I like the variety of approaches in the escape room. I have a box of locks and stuff And that is my beginning escape room. I got really excited about it and so I think it lends itself to what I am teaching this year- one is in social studies and (the other) in math. I think just being able to introduce it to them and then being like we are one of the Explorers or in the middle of the fur trade... that is only one level of it and so I think I will definitely like to keep using it and see where it goes.

How did the experience open opportunities for wonder and curiosity? What might that look like? We asked about what evidence that the teachers might have seen in the work itself or inspired by it in later instances.

A: I think that students were inspired in the escape room experience. There were kids, who are usually very quiet or reserved and they super excelled at the challenge... and this is what we have experienced...even kids who don't necessarily work well in groups but in that setting, you could not do it for them. They had to engage in a different way and they did. I think for them to change... as long as maybe as a teacher you have to be like, "Remember when you were doing this?" when they don't want to work with others later...just seeing that and seeing the kind of potential in that kid to be able to take on something so different than what is going on normally in the class, they will go for it. We saw that in the makerspace later...in both places, you need to work as a team. Some even want to continue doing escape room parts in the next part of the research in social studies. They just did not get sick of it. They continued to be curious about the rooms and excited to do them again. When they first tried the rooms, they were talking over one another, "Did you see that? Hey, what about this?" Even if they were completely wrong, it did not matter. Even when they knew they had already checked one pocket, they did it again, for the sake of their own curiosity. Even if twelve kids did it before them, they needed to satisfy that what they were looking for was not there. It just encouraged them to continue to try things later on.

T: We also want to share this with colleagues. I think presenting it though, we're doing a pocket of the escape room and then there's a pocket doing makerspace, and I think being able to show them that it's very reliable and then even just doing little bits of it not necessarily making a huge escape room, but even... small things like QR codes, like we did for math, we collaborated and every one of our kids were around the school. There was one point it came out that I just happened to walk upstairs and my students were doing their work and talking to another teacher and she said, "What are you doing?" and just that they could explain it... that was really cool. I don't think it needs to be this big elaborate project. It can be the little things... the students have commented that they can have a little escape room at their desks by just using or planning a puzzle. If you finish the puzzle, you can challenge your friend... you can have the pieces all over the room. It just makes learning more interesting for the kids.

Etymologically, “escape” means to “free oneself from confinement” (<https://www.etymonline.com>, 2018). It seemed to us the aspects of gamification were transforming the learning experiences for both the teachers and the students in the classrooms and perhaps they were being freed from the curriculum in ways that they had not before. We wondered what this meant to the teachers:

A: I think its not that I always knew about gaming but I do think it is something super powerful. I think that I just realized now that I can do it for real in the classroom and it works. I reflect a lot on myself when I play a game. I just think about that when I play a game, I have fun. We say that singing a song when learning French is more about playing than language. For me, a game doesn't have a limitation. You can do a lot of things when you play, everybody can get it and find a place and its not just about the individual person, it's about when you play and you can see so much learning going on. I think the kids know it too and it's very powerful... they ask all the time, “Can we play that again?” Now, I just give them the chance to try out new games or even better, make them themselves using puzzles...

We hear Gadamer in her words; a recognition that something is appearing within the lines of conversation, “A child begins to play by imitation, affirming what he knows and affirming his own being in the process...the joy of recognition is rather the joy of knowing more than is already familiar” (Gadamer, 1975, p. 113). Etymologically, “play” means to occupy oneself; frolic, take charge of (<https://www.etymonline.com>, 2018). It would seem to us that it is not only the student is taking charge but also the teacher by considering that something else is going on in the classroom that looks like fun but is about engaged learning.

The other three teachers who agreed to speak with us, assuming numbers rather than names, had been teaching in a school, where most of the staff embraced design thinking as the normal course of their teaching. They adapted aspects of the escape room and spoke of a freeing for learning,

1. In terms of the whole idea that is more inquiry-based, getting away from a traditional way of thinking, I think that whole idea is changes scares us a bit as teachers. That's not even the whole idea of design thinking, it's just that change is really hard. So moving away from what you are used to... I just think of it as blowing things up, literally. I feel that aspect of just letting go of control and just trying something new is probably...just really hard.

2. We kind of got excited about the whole idea of scavenger hunts. When I think of scavenger hunts, they're fun. So maybe a little more engaged perhaps. More motivated.

1. Students were definitely engaged in the activity. I think because we are really excited by what we were doing...I did go into the situation thinking, what am I getting myself into? What are we doing here? Blowing this, we blew up this unit completely from last year... So, I think because we came into really excited and pumped about it, I think that energy transferred over to the kids...so I found that when we came to it really excited and said, “this is what we are going to be doing and it is really cool.” And we tell the kids that this is what we are learning because we went and did some learning like you guys do... it gets them engaged. It gets them excited so that when you say something like a scavenger hunt, they know what it is...my excitement grabs them.

Providing students with the opportunities to experience learning through games, such as escape rooms, puzzles, scavenger hunts, provides them with the opportunity to return to the idea of wonder and curiosity in the classroom. L'Ecuyer suggests that, “wonder is the center of all motivation and action in the child. Wonder and beauty are what makes life genuinely personal. Wonder attunes to beauty through sensitivity...when wonder,

beauty, sensitivity and secure attachment are all present, learning is meaningful (L'Ecuyer, 2014, p. 6). Something has altered in the classrooms for the teachers that we engaged in conversation,

A: Something is changing inside of how they feel that it's not just the same, something is changing inside. They are asking to learn in different ways. They are excited about it...

T: I think teaching this way is definitely worthwhile just because they get, you know, it gets through and they get to move through the content in a way that is engaging. You know they are learning. The curriculum can be so overwhelming and I think, how do I reach all these different kids and you know, hit this and this, with one activity. I find that really challenging and so I find escape rooms, design thinking, allows for kids and me to come at it in different ways...kids just come from all different backgrounds and have so many interests. It is just cool to see certain kids thrive in other areas and in different situations, given that opportunity.

Conclusions:

There is more to be done in this topic... more questions to pose and consider as the work moves forward. One of the aspects that are particularly interesting is the idea that if we want students to be critical and creative thinkers in their work, their teachers need to also explore creativity in their own work and develop it accordingly. We think that continuing to support the work of teachers in such cohorts is instrumental in developing their curiosity and creativity. Our participants' spoke of how student learning was transformed in the classroom and thereby opened up possibilities for their own ways of thinking in the process. It is our recommendation, based on our conversations, that this work continues with the support of the District. We will be submitting this work for publication and are interested in future opportunities to explore and support learning in RVS in the future.

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