

## Paper Picker Press - Philosophy

Learning through creativity is the approach that energizes the Paper Picker Press. Through this successful literacy program, young people -- and older ones -- have fun playing with literature as they develop their attention to detail as well as interpretive skills. The principle activity is to re-work literary texts that feature challenging vocabulary and subtle uses of grammar and imagery. Students re-write these texts along tangents of the original piece; they perform variants through theater games, paint visions or moods inspired by stories, and set them to music or dance, continuing for as long as the program lasts to interpret the text through any art taught by local instructors. The program guides students to intervene in existing literature, and thereby to develop ownership of language and of other expressive media. We demystify literature and treat it as a pretext for play.

Our program has origins in economically devastated Buenos Aires, where in 2003 Eloísa Cartonera began to buy cardboard from practically destitute paper pickers and to engage them in producing individually decorated books from recycled material and unpublished literature donated by Argentina's best writers. Sarita Cartonera replicated the project in low-literacy Lima and found that sustaining the publishing house depended on multiplying the readership. The brilliant response was to create a pedagogical program that treats literature itself as recycled material available for endlessly creative recycling. Re-writing stories from a new point of view, from different times and places, and in various genres entitles students to become authors, as they master the technical and conceptual materials they play with. Creativity is an incentive to mastery, because choosing to change a text requires readers to identify the existing mechanisms in order to contest them with alternatives.

Conventional teaching has favored directing children to convergent and predictable answers to specific questions. It privileges data retrieval or "lower order thinking," over critical and creative "higher order thinking" which seems like an extra and sometimes infinitely delayed step for struggling students. But this first-things-first approach that gets stuck in the given facts without exploring possible interpretations has been stifling for students and it rarely reaches a second level that would develop their mental agility. Paradoxically, as we have learned, a lower order focus on factual information can *follow* from higher order creative manipulations that highlight details in the found material. What happens when students treat texts as pre-texts for improvising alternative plots, for re-framing characters, or changing the register of language? Students learn critical thinking by exploring how the original text works; and they learn to mine the original piece for lexical, grammatical, and structural, elements in order to replace and to redesign them. Original elements become dramatically visible for young iconoclasts who read with a creative purpose, demystifying literature into usable stuff that can be appropriated to make practically any text "relevant." There is no need to select customized reading materials and to limit the exposure of particular students to particular texts, because students can authorize themselves to customize their own irreverent versions of the original. Young creators develop mastery of a text so that they can refuse its ultimate authority.

Our approach takes risks, in the spirit that Paolo Freire defended risk as the necessary trigger for free thinking. Until now, in underprivileged schools that resentfully submit to standardized testing, teachers have been understandably risk-averse. They stick to basic skills through a first-things-first approach: first the factual details of a text and then interpretation. Teaching for testing produces unhappy pressures for everyone. Administrators, teachers, students, and parents all generally surrender to a perceived requirement to focus on facts. But the irony has been that this cautious approach to literacy keeps test scores down, because children who don't explore creative interpretation score badly on questions of interpretation and therefore on ratings of higher order, critical, thinking.

The Paper Picker Press is not a detailed recipe for innovation. Years ago, Freire warned us against pedagogical packages that urge innovation and deliver detailed programs to follow. Instead, we train teachers to liberate their own creativity through variations of activities that we have developed, and through their own new experiments. Teachers and collaborating artist-instructors need to "own" their particular version of the program in order to model the risk-taking and self-authorized interpretations that we encourage among students.

Among the benefits of the Paper Picker Press, the most significant is surely its effective development of student literacy towards both lower and higher-order thinking. But the corollary effects for education in general and for broad civic development are worth appreciating. Teachers who embrace creativity as a valued human faculty promote self-reliance and resourcefulness for young people who can become active citizens. And schools that hire artists to help educate their students identify the arts as social resources, and thereby acknowledge that creativity is a foundation for free societies. Without creativity, the meaning of citizenship loses a sense of active participation that depends on the freedom to adjust laws and practices in light of ever new practical and ethical challenges. Without art, citizenship would shrink to a notion of compliance that treats society as if it were a closed text that we read for facts about "what is," rather than reading society as a work in progress that invites us to make adjustments and to explore the "what if."

## **GUIDELINES FOR THE PAPER PICKER PRESS**

New and existing branches of the PPP will share basic features in common, to maintain the general approach. Each recognized branch will be listed among our PPP associates on the [culturalagents.org](http://culturalagents.org) website. We invite new branches to register as authorized representatives of the PPP. In each case the PPP will take on particular characteristics, depending on the available arts and languages used, but all will share a few basic features:

1. A work of literature, narrative or poetry, serves as the core material to be interpreted through a variety of artistic media.
2. Student journals and books are made from recycled materials. These can be used to create musical instruments too, and costumes, props, scientific equipment, etc.
3. Each session develops a creative interpretation with attention to details of vocabulary and grammar in the "original" text, treated here as recycled material.

4. Students and instructors develop “ownership” of their artistic interventions and of the literary material.
5. A culminating project, exhibition and/or show, displays the work of the PPP to parents and community.