
**ART, EDUCATION, AND PLAY:
A DIALOGUE WITH DR. CHRYSOGONUS SIDDHA MALILANG**
Arte, educação e jogo:
Uma conversa com Chrysogonus Siddha Malilang

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We had the privilege of engaging in a dialogue with Dr. Chrysogonus Siddha Malilang, a distinguished senior lecturer within the Faculty of Education and Society at the University of Malmo, specializing in Literature Studies, Children's Literature, and Creative Writing. Possessing a diverse academic background, including a doctoral degree in Literature Study (English), Chrysogonus contributes a wealth of knowledge and expertise to our scholarly conversation.

Dr. Malilang's research pursuits encompass a spectrum of compelling themes, including Creative Writing Pedagogy, Play in Education, Critical Pedagogy, Community of Practice, and a/r/tography. Additionally, he investigates the confluence of Children's Literature and New Media, exploring unconventional formats such as graphic novels and video games. As an accomplished author with published creative works spanning novels to poetry books, his literary contributions have resonated with audiences in Macau, Sweden, and Indonesia.

Our discourse today will scrutinize some of Dr. Malilang's recent scholarly contributions, shedding light on articles addressing the re-appropriation and alteration of aged children's literature in ongoing teaching practices. Furthermore, we will delve into his active involvement in research initiatives, notably the implementation of Visual Thinking Strategies (VTS)

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in Swedish Early Years Learning Education, and the exploration of a/r/tography within the intersections of education and the arts.

01. In "A Multicultural Community of Practice in Creative Writing," you advocate for a teaching approach in art through immersion, challenging the idea that art is best learned by not being understood. What specific experiences or observations prompted you to question this traditional perspective on teaching art? Additionally, how would you address potential criticisms or concerns about the effectiveness or limitations of the immersion method in art education?

CSM: Perhaps the biggest pull for me to advocate that approach is my own experience. I started my doctoral degree in Creative Writing with insecurity over my own creative process. I was swallowed by my own thought that only established authors should go for a doctoral study in Creative Writing. However, my PhD supervisor, who was an established poet, assured me that it should not be the case. He led me into thinking that my time during the doctoral study is a "becoming" process for me, the becoming of an artist, a researcher, and a future educator. It is, thus, normal not to understand everything in order to create a new artwork as learning to create through rigid principles of art creation is no different than doing "paint-by-number".

When he said this, it led me into reflection of how I learned to write in the past. I started writing professionally at the age of 13, when I joined a local newspaper as their junior journalist. This is the age before one is taught how to write news, opinion piece, feature article, reports, or even interview at school. Instead of learning everything formally in school, I learned through trials and errors under the guidance of the more senior journalists. If I could learn journalistic writing through immersion like that, why couldn't I learn creative writing through the same process? After all, I found that my journalistic writing becomes more communicative than some of my friends during the writing class, mainly because the writing principles are integrated already in my habits and I did not have to let myself worry about that all the time.

Of course, this kind of method is nothing new in art education. In fact, this is perhaps the traditional way of learning arts. The biggest problem with this method right now is the education system, where everything needs to be graded and treated "objectively". This is not to say that objective treatment of knowledge is bad. On the contrary, it is good. Arts, however, is in its very nature subjective and it does not really benefit from the seemingly "objective" rubrics for assessment. Thus, this immersion fits

informal / non-formal education better.

The setting of informal / non-formal education, which will allow a relatively limitless learning period, works well with the immersion approach.

02. In the same article, you draw parallels between the modern concept of immersion in art communities and the traditional Javanese apprenticeship, known as 'nyantrik.' Can you share a personal experience or specific instance where the nyantrik concept had a profound impact on your own artistic development or understanding of creative learning? How has this traditional approach influenced your perspective on the relationship between mentorship and artistic growth?

CSM: The concept “nyantrik” is actually an integral part of my upbringing. When I was a child, my parents worked closely together with a Javanese shadow puppet player (*dhalang*) who had his *cantrik*. As time went by and I got more involved with the art/theatre community in my hometown, I encountered more *nyantrik* instances. Apart from mere knowledge/skill transfer, I saw that the *cantrik* gained a new family, a new network, and a new support system in their future career.

I did not think about this integral part of my culture / past experience until my doctoral study, where I had to justify my focus on extramural art education. The deeper dig on the concept of *nyantrik* and apprenticeship even led me to understand that the ideal doctoral study process is actually a form of *nyantrik* in the academic context. This is also what I experienced in my own study, where my supervisor helped me forming my network and support system. He introduced me to some scholars and creative writers that form my current academic/creative network in the present day. The constant dialogue that I am still having with both my supervisor/mentor and other creative writers to date still fuel my creative process as well as widening my network.

03. How do you perceive the role of a/r/tography in bridging the realms of art, research, and pedagogy, particularly within the context of your scholarly pursuits in Creative Writing Pedagogy and the exploration of Children's Literature and New Media?

CSM: This is actually an interesting question, since a lot of people tend to see a/r/tography and children's literature as two separated field. For me, my doctoral focus on creative writing allows me to see the different side of children's literature study. Until today, most of the studies within

children's literature are either theory-heavy or reading from adult scholars. My dabbling in the creative process allows me to think from the art-creation process, especially in multimodal texts, and use that perspective to widen my research.

One thing that I can think of in using the a/r/tography in my current teaching career is in my fanfiction course, in which I asked the students something that they find interesting from a YA book to research / study further. Their result of the study, however, will be presented in the form of a fanfiction / creative writing.

There certainly is a special place for a/r/tography within the academia, yet I cannot see it happening in the near future. It is the dominance of the hierarchical approach to knowledge in academia that will not go away easily that will make it difficult for a/r/tography to break the niche.

04. The article “Revamping Mrs. Piggle-Wiggle in Classroom Practice: Negotiating Stereotypes, Literary Language, and Outdated Values” discusses the revision of children's books from a user level perspective, focusing on alterations made by individuals without publisher intervention. What inspired your interest in exploring this aspect of the literature adaptation process, and how does it contribute to the broader discussion on preserving children's ‘innocence’?

CSM: What inspired my interest in exploring this issue? To be honest, it is the ongoing debate about children's literature and the censorship. A lot of the studies on the censorship are mostly on the publisher level or the academic level, mostly ignoring how the censorship / attempt of censorship at the user-level. The result of the study, as you can see, proves that children are actually not as “innocence” as we, the adults, would like to think. Instead of being our idealized tabula rasa, children in the study demonstrate that they are capable of critical thinking, forming their own thought of what should and should not be done in life.

One of my favourite parts in the study is when the librarian forgot to censor the book during the reading and the children's responses did not really fit with the librarian's expectation for the worst. It is a strong proof that children have their own agency and thought process, capable of surprising adults who mostly undermined and underestimated them.

05. The conclusion of this article suggests that an intertextual approach, exploring students' reactions and prior knowledge, could enhance the joint reading of old children's books. How do you envision educators

implementing such an approach in the classroom to create a more inclusive and enriching reading experience for students from diverse backgrounds?

CSM: Just as I suggested, the joint reading of any children's books should allow everyone to participate with their own background and knowledge. In doing so, the collaborative reading opens up a space for intercultural dialogue. This collaborative reception should become a new standard in the classroom, especially with the rise of multicultural classrooms in the last couple of years. The old children's books, which are mostly problematic, fit in this setting since some of the outdated values are actually perfect to be discussed in the framework of "problem-posing education," an approach from the Critical Pedagogy to help fostering critical consciousness and awareness of the readers.

06. In your article "Exploring children's and adults' joint appropriation of children's books through the concept of playworld", you discuss the risk of sidelining creativity and playfulness in language arts teaching, particularly in Nordic countries. Could you elaborate on the specific challenges or trends that led to this concern, and how playworld addresses these issues?

CSM: My answer might be a bit harsh, but one of the main reasons for focusing on reading for reading skills instead of creativity and playfulness is the worship of PISA. There is a certain pressure in every country to improve their standing in the annual PISA result, leading into a washback in the teaching. The more score oriented the teaching of reading is, the less motivated the young learners to read. On the other hand, the teacher-training also mostly focuses on the "most effective method" to teach reading, sidelining the entertainment / creative / playful aspect of reading. This concern is the main reason that drove me to do the research on playworld, so it could raise awareness of everyone involved in the teaching of reading, both the teachers and those who work in teacher-training.

07. The concept of playworld involves a temporary abolition of adult authority, allowing children to take the lead in exploring and reshaping literary texts. The article emphasizes the importance of the teacher's role in the playworld, suggesting that they should abstain from seizing control and embrace an open-minded approach. How have teachers responded to incorporating playworld in their classrooms, and have you observed any notable changes in their teaching practices?

CSM: I can only answer from the Scandinavian perspective, where

teachers are actually trained to give bigger space for their students during the teaching-learning activity. While playworld demands them to temporarily abolish their adult authority, they did not have any problem with that. When it is time for them to reclaim their “authority,” the students are also aware that the “playtime” is over. Of course, it might also depend on the teacher’s individual teaching style and I might have a bias from my own observation. It would be interesting to see how this could take place in other educational setting, where the power hierarchy between teacher and students manifests differently.

It is perhaps easier for a more senior teacher to adopt this approach since they are generally more confident in establishing the power structure in the class. But again, it might also be my bias since most of the teachers I observed were senior teachers. This approach made the classroom dynamics livelier and some students who barely participated in the classical discussion found courage to at least respond. This also benefits the newly-arrived students to further find their place in the classroom and facilitate their integration.

08. Looking ahead, you mention the potential for further development and application of the playworld concept in different stages of education. Could you share your vision for future research in this area and how playworld might contribute to enhancing creative expressions and playful negotiation of children’s literature in diverse educational settings?

CSM: I see the rise of child-centred approach in the field of children’s literature in the last couple of years and I hope that Playworld can find its footing there. While the idea of ‘playful reading’ has been afloat for a while, I see playworld as something more than just playful reading. This is perhaps the crossover between my interest in children’s literature and creative writing. By producing their own creative work as a response to the text they are reading, the young readers are owning the texts and making it their own. This grants them more agency and paves a way against the lingering adult’s normativity beyond the creation of children’s literature.

09. Your current research project is on Visual Thinking Strategies. What inspired the decision to extend the application of VTS beyond its original context in Art Museums and into early years language education? Could you elaborate on the specific aspects of visual literacy skills that VTS aims to enhance in early years English language learners, and how these skills contribute to their overall development?

CSM: It is the difference in how adults and children see and enjoy images that motivated me to extend the application of VTS in early years language education. Commonly, people only think about textual literacy whenever they are discussing language learning. My training in Deleuzian rhizome, however, made me think that different kinds of literacy should meet in order to enhance each other. The visual literacy that every young learner actually possess, due to the existing education system, is often neglected and undermined, leading into it being underdeveloped as one grows up. This concern is one of the main reason to integrate VTS into early years language education. As this sharpens children's visual literacy, VTS also stimulates participatory dialogue and critical thinking among them. The more they are practicing VTS, the stronger the habit for critical thinking and appreciation to visual expression that they will form.

10. As the focus is on student teachers of early years English language learners, how do you envision the integration of VTS into their teacher training programs, and what are the expected benefits for both student teachers and their pupils in the long term?

CSM: As part of my teaching in the teacher training programme, my colleagues and I have been working in including VTS in their courses, both as our method for teaching certain material and as a method they can use in their own teaching. We hope that this introduction of VTS can help our teacher students and their future pupil to develop multiliteracies and critical thinking.

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