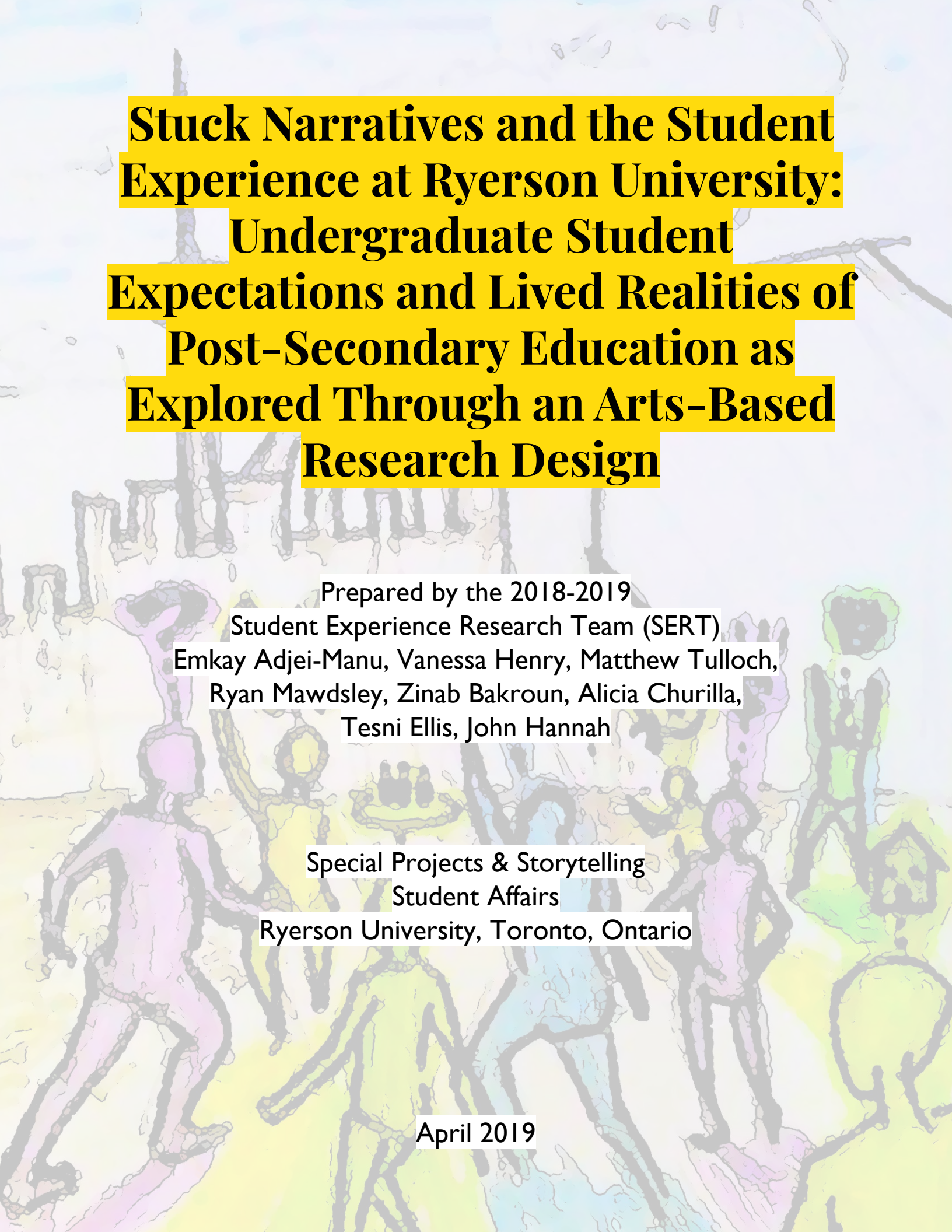




Stuck Narratives and the Student Experience at Ryerson University: Undergraduate Student Expectations and Lived Realities of Post-Secondary Education as Explored Through an Arts-Based Research Design

Prepared by the 2018-2019

Student Experience Research Team (SERT)

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Special Projects & Storytelling

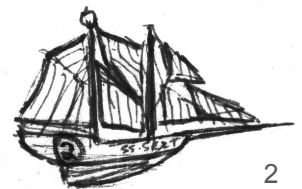
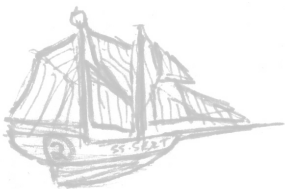
Student Affairs

Ryerson University, Toronto, Ontario

April 2019

**“knowledge . . .
never arrives . . .
it is always on the brink”**

~ Lorri Neilsen



Preamble

The following reports on the experience and findings of the inaugural Student Experience Research Team (SERT) - a project of Ryerson Student Affairs Special Projects & Storytelling, generously funded by Ryerson's Registrar's Office. The purpose of this project was to provide a meaningful research experience for Ryerson undergraduate students in the context of Student Affairs and its concerns. The style and purpose of this report is a bit unorthodox. Here we weave together some traditional elements that describe and account for the research, with more informal features that describe the experience of the research process itself for the team. These two elements are integral to each other - the experience of learning for the undergraduate researchers is linked inextricably with the way in which the research process played out for them and the insights that were generated as a result.

The Student Experience Research Team project sought to investigate questions about Ryerson University students' sense of belonging in a university institution and the ways in which narratives, in their varied formats and from different sources, about the post-secondary experience impact students' actual lived experiences within it. SERT used arts-based methods of inquiry, including collage, drawing, memory/mind/hand mapping, writing, photography, and film, both as tools to elicit responses from participants and as ways to share the results of their work. SERT's project was conceived as having three phases: the first, to investigate whether there is a gap between expectations and realities of the university experience felt by Ryerson students. The second, to understand how students feel about that perceived gap and whether it impacts their sense of belonging in a university community. The third, to consider whether there are creative ways to close that gap and contribute to a more complex understanding of the student experience, in turn enhancing students' sense of belonging in community. This report is part of Phase One culminating in an exhibition in the form of an art gallery/display that shares the participants' works and reflections, as permitted, and the facilitator's interpretations of those works, and reflections on their own experience in conducting the project.

A note about the format - a zine of sorts. In keeping with our arts-based methods of learning and inquiring as a team, we decided to present our report in a non-traditional way. A zine felt appropriate to provide a visual representation of our report, findings, and insights as well as to display our participants' collage works in full themselves.

Background of SERT

This project, the Student Experience Research Team (SERT), is driven by four commitments:

- Creating a meaningful, high-impact research opportunity for Ryerson undergraduate students that will enrich their understanding of their own and their fellow students' experience in higher education.
- Supporting these students financially by paying them a good wage for this.
- Activating non-traditional, “ways of knowing” in our methodology.
- Making a meaningful contribution to the field of Student Affairs through these research efforts.

The findings are quite clear about the value of meaningful research experiences for undergraduate students (Wolf, 2018). These experiences are said to lead to the development of critical thinking skills and a huge range of other professional and academic competencies, increased student confidence, greater persistence and retention rates, stronger graduate school applications, deeper learning and cognitive growth, more focused career considerations, etc. The provision of these experiences inside academic units and departments is a growing practice but it is relatively unexplored territory in the context of Student Affairs in Canada. Given the ongoing need for research and inquiry into the work of Student Affairs and the student experience, and our decided focus in Student Affairs on providing meaningful experiences for students, this seems an obvious gap. The SERT project is an attempt to address this gap by providing a research opportunity in our field, one in which the students will receive a working wage, rather than an academic credit.

The other gap to be filled by this project is an expansion of our modes of inquiry into Student Affairs questions about the student experience, often understood according to some pretty narrow and dominant narratives – transition theory, student development theory, student engagement. These foundations have added significantly to our understanding of things, and have shaped our approaches to the work, but, surely, they don't tell the whole story. In fact, it is likely that our preoccupation with these good but narrow perspectives has obscured from view other possibilities. Most research in Student Affairs focuses on either a very traditional quantitative analysis of some causal relationship between a program and an outcome, or a traditional qualitative account of student feedback about some aspect of their experience with a program. (Naturally, there is some range here). This is, of course, natural and good, but it also shows a hesitancy to explore other forms of inquiry. So, in our pursuit of better understanding the varieties of student experience, with student researchers as our partners, we declare, in this project, our greater attentiveness to and preference for the “context of discovery” over the context of certainty, causality and justification. And we commit here to incorporating more non-traditional ways of knowing, or modes of inquiry into our work as a way of making a meaningful contribution to the field of Student Affairs research in Canada.

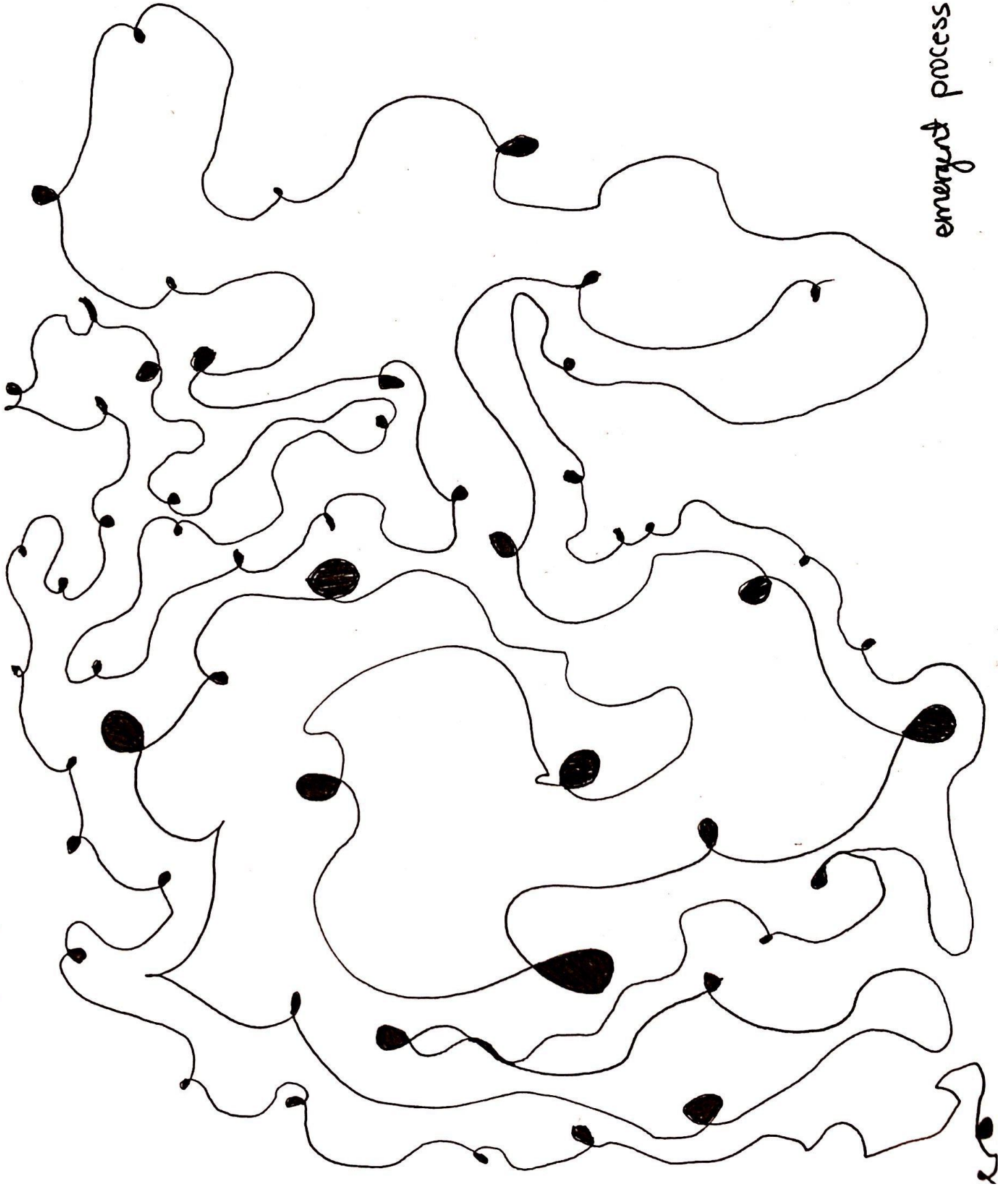
The SERT Approach

SERT began its inquiry with a blank slate, making our first priority the formation of community in our research group, one grounded in a spirit of risk-taking, tolerance for ambiguity, and the notion of interconnectedness. It was critical that we articulated our biases, our non-neutrality, and the connection between the researchers and the researched, a principle well-expressed by some Indigenous research frameworks that root inquiry in the formation of community (Lavalee, 2009). And we have done this with a kind of unfolding intention towards art as a way of seeing things, of jarring ourselves, of vexing us, of helping us notice, and notice our noticing. Considerable time was spent on this community-formation, facilitated through regular meetings in which we engaged in arts-based learning exercises informed by the work of Lynda Barry (2014) and Ivan Brunetti (2011). These in-person meetings were augmented by various field trips to art galleries, and other installations of art-as-research, and the building of our SERT blog in which we further engaged the students in required readings, visual literature reviews, and various other “homework” and reflection assignments. In this way, SERT became a kind of seminar on research methods in student affairs, focusing especially on non-traditional arts-based approaches. The team used this foundation, and their own personal experience as students, to then begin a more focused exploration of the Student Affairs literature to find questions about student experience that could become subject to meaningful inquiry by them.

Drawing as Inquiry

One of the tools we used as a team was creating visual literature reviews - an exercise whereby a summary of the article is created using any visual modality, such as drawing, collage, or photos, and point form notes answer questions like “What happened?”, “While reading, what did you see in your mind’s eye?” and “What questions do you still have?” This exercise is adapted from Lynda Barry’s (2014) “Daily Diary Activity” and was learned in a May 2018 “Visual arts as research methods: Sketching, drawing and comics” workshop lead by Noah Kenneally and Clara Juando-Prats and hosted out of the University of Toronto & St. Michael’s Hospital. Visual lit reviews provide the reader a different lens through which to engage with readings and resources so when we met to discuss the relevant literature we’d read, or when we asked ourselves questions about research methods and pondered them using visuals, we found unique insights emerged that might not have had we stuck to a traditional literature review. The symbolism and visual metaphors also help enhance memory recall for what we learned in such a way that we’d often come back to our drawings and revisit their meanings. Some of these images and notes are included throughout this zine.

emergent process



Our Focus

This process led to various lines of inquiry - issues of student transition, exploring barriers to access, measures of success, and student persistence etc. Ultimately, we were led into the work that explores the relationship between expectations and reality of the student experience - the work of Sara Appleton-Knapp & Kathleen Krentler (2006), Dustin Shepler & Sherry Woosley (2012), Lynne Jackson et al. (2000), and Pancer et al. (2000). These researchers suggest that a discrepancy between students' expectations about university life and their actual experience once having entered the institution can exacerbate an already difficult transition process. Pancer et al. (2000) found that a discrepancy between students' expectations about university life and their actual experience once having entered the institution can create difficult adjustment experiences. The authors considered how the "freshman myth" contributes to this dissonance, and they found that access to more information about university prior to the transition can contribute to a student's more complex understanding and therefore more ability to adjust to stress and difficult situations in university life. Balloo, Pauli and Worrell (2017) similarly found that why an individual chooses to attend university has an overall effect on their performance, attendance, and their likelihood of dropping out. The authors make the argument that "student experiences may be impacted on negatively by unrealistic or unattainable expectations. Therefore, it is important to understand what these expectations are," (Balloo, Pauli, Worrell, 2017, p. 1374). This became the focus of our inquiry.

More precisely, we became interested in the idea that students in higher education are the recipients of codified representations of the “student experience” contained in mainstream culture and in higher-education promotional material, and concluded that it is reasonable to ask whether, and to what extent these representations are incongruent with the actual lived experience of Ryerson students. And, further, if there is an appreciable mismatch between expectations and reality, does this lead to degraded outcomes for any of these students, or harmful levels of disorientation that are difficult to resolve? SERT was deeply committed to doing something that would lead to better experiences for their fellow students, so at the root of this inquiry was always the expressed purpose of being better able to meaningfully respond and support students as they make their transitions into and through the university experience. A deeper understanding of the relationship between the expected and the actual student experience would, presumably, lead to changes in practice that could address this gap - including the development of a more nuanced, thoughtful approach to marketing, to telling the story of post-secondary education in a way that better prepares prospective students to the realities and vicissitudes of that experience.

With that overarching goal in mind, our research questions were formed:

To what extent do students experience a sense of dissonance between the stereotypical representation of the university experience and their actual experience of it. And, further, to what extent does this dissonance lead to negative outcomes such as degraded mental health, a diminished sense of belonging, withdrawal, etc. And, finally, can the addition of more authentic forms of representation provide something valuable to students as they contemplate higher education – a way to close this gap between perception and reality?

Put simply: Is there a discrepancy? What is the impact of that discrepancy? What can we do about it? The three phases of SERT.

We hypothesise that students with more complex understandings of undergraduate education tend to adjust more seamlessly than those with more stereotypical, optimistic and/or fearful expectations. Embedded in this hypothesis are presumptions that informed our lines of inquiry:

- Universities project sanitized, primarily positive representations of the student experience that are often incongruent with student realities.
- Student experiences are directly or indirectly related to students' levels of belonging and involvement on campus.
- Myths about the university experience directly influence student academic and social outcomes within their undergraduate years of schooling.
- Violation of student expectations influence mental health, feelings of belonging, academic performance, and undergraduate adjustments.

These claims rang true in the minds of the undergraduate SERT researchers and generated a deep commitment to doing the work to better understand this feature of the undergraduate experience for Ryerson students. Here we report on Phase One of this project.

Design & Methodology

Guiding Principles

Go Slow. A central and underlying feature of our approach was deliberate slowness - to meet regularly, make room for shifting direction, for reading, for writing, for reflecting, for endless, free-style discussion, for getting to know and support each other, for team-building. This is contrary to most work in Student Affairs which is generally characterized by speediness. We could have easily lapsed into the more common, full-tilt rhythm of a project. And it would have also produced, no doubt, something worthwhile. But we suspect that, in the pursuit of speed, we would have been propelled onto old tried and true paths, the most direct routes between A and B. And we would have deprived ourselves of savoring what was in the moment as we went, noticing more, gaining insight through a deliberate and leisurely pace. What that slowness did, above all, is give us time to better know each other, to trust each other, to support each other, to understand each other's particular strengths, and to make space for all of it. It's not revolutionary. It's just a choice. Go slow.

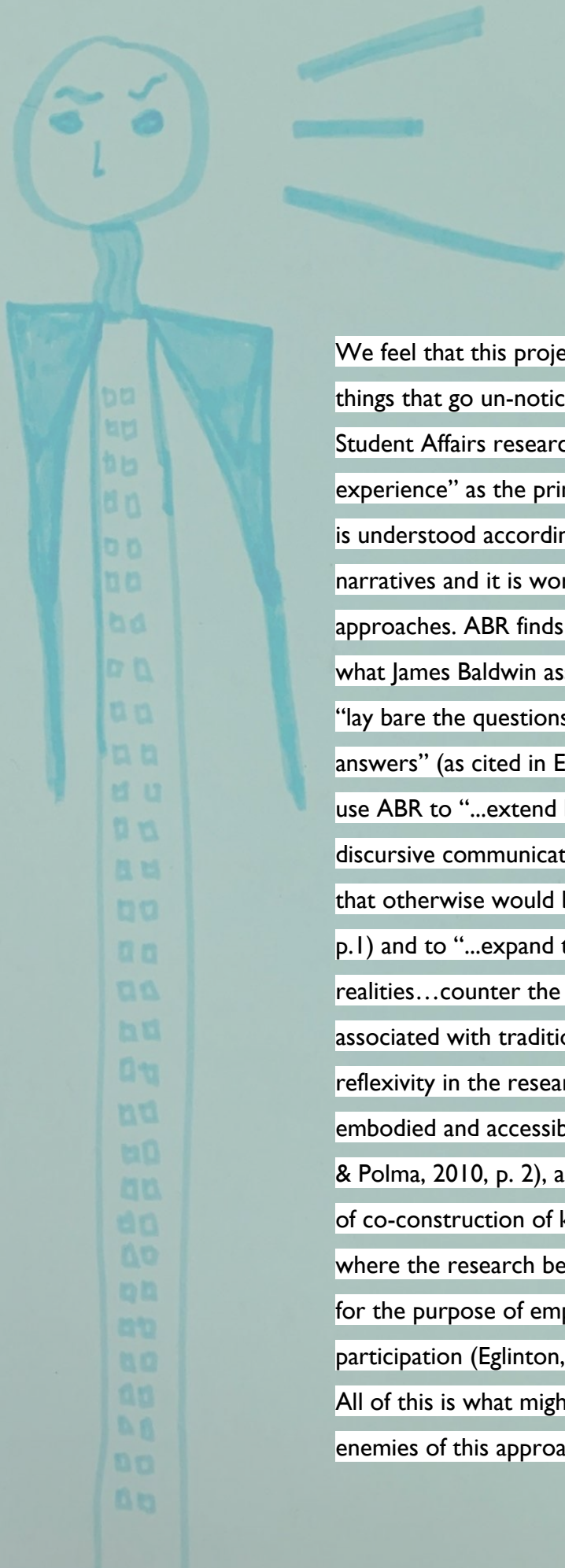
Research with, not upon. Students have found themselves to be the objects of much study, but are not often invited to actively participate in the inquiry and knowledge production process. This project, led as it was by undergraduate student researchers, was committed to an approach that disrupted this inherent power imbalance between the researcher and the researched, and sought a more participatory approach. We subscribe to the idea, articulated by Karen Ross (2017, para. 2), that "... methodological choices at various moments across the research process hold potential for creating empowering dynamics within a given research context." SERT was attentive and attuned to this idea of collapsing power dynamics at all stages of the research design and its execution, inviting student participants in the research to be active in the process as it unfolded.

Make conspicuous our biases. We are generally inclined towards the critical side of educational thinking, our ilk being folks like John Dewey, bell hooks, Maxine Green, Elliot Eisner, Paulo Friere, Sara Ahmed, Linda Darling-Hammond, James Baldwin, Henry Giroux – you know, smart, lefty shit-disturbers. And we're inclined by the prospect, not of certainty or objectivity, but by ambiguity, and exploration, and the emotional aspects of social life. This is mostly in keeping with our Student Affairs colleagues who seem generally to swim in that pool, driven by a desire to understand the peculiarities of students' lives. And we're inclined, not by the strictly scientific, but by the artistic as the form of expression that moves us most deeply. And so these inclinations present themselves as we contemplate "doing research" in Student Affairs. How to be productive, thoughtful shit-disturbers in this endeavour? Now, this is not at all a rejection of traditional, positivist, quantitative approaches to research. As we say, we are hospitable to all forms of inquiry that serve us well and ethically. We see no need for hostility here and believe that the method should simply be chosen according to its fitness for purpose, and that the researcher should offer some open acknowledgement of their inclinations and biases, as we do here. This can go a long way towards loosening some of the oppressiveness that can be inherent to methods dogmatically conceived. We believe, not in the righteousness of only one true method, but in a research continuum, that the contours of the human experience are most usefully illuminated by seeing them from a variety of perspectives. So, towards our goal of better understanding the varieties of student experience, arts-based research approaches are suitably fit.

Arts-Based Inquiry

So, what is an arts-based approach to research? And why do it?

We are guided especially by the thinking of Elliot Eisner and Tom Barone who articulate as clear a vision for arts-based research (ABR) as we know. They define ABR as a “... process that uses the expressive qualities of form to convey meaning” (Eisner & Barone, 2012, p. xii). This is an emphasis, not on objective truths, or definitive answers, or causal relationships between variables. An inquiry driven by those things would lead to more traditional research methodologies as the appropriate choice. But inquiry can be led by other concerns, other interests – things like the provision of new perspectives, a deepened understanding of social phenomenon, the disruption of dominant narratives, the productive advancement of conversation, the vexing of others. And, animated by those legitimate motivations, the researcher can fruitfully turn to more “non-traditional” forms of research like ABR. ABR uses expressive forms – film, photography, collage, poetry, fiction, drawing, music, dance, sculpture – as devices of inquiry, as data, as objects of scrutiny, as forms of reporting – all with the purpose of revealing something new, poking into what is often hidden behind dominant views, to “make vivid what one had not noticed” (Eisner & Barone, 2012, p. 156).



We feel that this project of unearthing, or illuminating things that go un-noticed, is a valuable thing to do in Student Affairs research. As mentioned, the “student experience” as the primary focus of Student Affairs work, is understood according to a narrow range of dominant narratives and it is worthwhile exploring alternative approaches. ABR finds its purpose here, as a way to do what James Baldwin asserts is the purpose of all art, to “lay bare the questions that have been hidden by the answers” (as cited in Eisner & Barone, 2012, p. 17). We use ABR to “...extend beyond the limiting constraints of discursive communication in order to express meanings that otherwise would be ineffable” (Eisner & Barone, 2012, p. 1) and to “...expand the possibilities of diverse realities...counter the hegemonic and linear thinking often associated with traditional research...increase voice and reflexivity in the research process...and create more embodied and accessible research results” (Butler-Kisber & Polma, 2010, p. 2), and finally, to engage “...in a process of co-construction of knowledge with our participants, where the research becomes shared with the community for the purpose of empowerment, engagement, and participation (Eglinton, Gubrium & Wexler, 2017, p. 18). All of this is what might be described by friends and enemies of this approach as lefty shit-disturber stuff.

Group Process

An important part of the design and methodology of this project involved the ways in which we operated as a collective, with an emphasis on community over curriculum. The approach was decidedly non-hierarchical, non-managerial so that design and methodological considerations were emergent rather than proclaimed. This was primarily a teaching and learning principle, a pedagogical approach that provided a particular kind of learning experience for the undergraduate researchers of SERT - learning through immersion, discovery, problem-solving, not restricted by any particular curricular requirements that might be present in a for-credit research seminar. The path of learning was very much built as we walked it. So, while these considerations do not normally make their way into a final report such as this, we felt it important to include because it was such an integral part of the evolving process of decision-making about research and its design here. And there are dual outcomes here - ones related to the research itself, the experience of the research participants, and others related to the researchers and their experience of researching.

So, our group process was itself a form of inquiry and we employed emergent, arts-based approaches to that inquiry to ground our weekly meetings together. We used these sessions, guided only by loose agendas, to articulate our purpose by building a team “manifesto”, consider research questions, what or whom would be the subjects of our inquiry, what methodology would be employed, what kind of data would be necessary, how it would be gathered, how we would assess its validity, etc. So, we dug in. Reading. Lots of reading. Writing, and reflection. Lots of it. And we started really exploring and using and understanding arts-based methods of inquiry to ground our SERT sessions, to facilitate our conversations and insights. We practiced this. And, through these processes, gnarly, and complex, and meandering, we arrived at our research question. We arrived at our decision to use an arts-based methodology. And we hammered out the details of a method, using collage as our interpretive tool, as a reflective process, as a form of elicitation, and as a way of conceptualizing ideas (Butler-Kisber & Poldma, 2010). And we worked out all the myriad details necessary to organize and document all of this through the institutional ethics review process which became a primary conduit for deep learning about the research process. Our submission was approved by Ryerson’s Research Ethics Board in early August 2018.

Research Design

Although informed by questions occasionally raised in the field of Student Affairs by others in the work of Sara Appleton-Knapp & Kathleen Krentler (2006), Sherry Woosley (2012), Casey Lynne Conklin (2014), Jackson et al. (2000), and Pancer et al. (2000) this research started with a blank slate. Our desire, not to make claims of certainty or causality, but to deepen our understanding of a specific aspect of the student transition experience, led to an arts-based method informed by the insights of Elliot Eisner about the value of art as research method. Methodologically, we follow the work of Butler-Kisber and Poldma and their insights about the use of collage as a device for making meaning from experience. The group decided focus groups were the most suitable format to bring students together to share their stories.

Participation in the study was open to any registered full or part-time Ryerson student having completed at least one year at Ryerson University. Recruitment took place through social media outreach as well as public outreach including emails to program administrators, print postering and word of mouth. In order to best ensure a participant population representative of the Ryerson student population (acknowledging the limitations of a small sample) we focused our messaging on student-run organizations, societies, and groups that speak to marginalized and specific-populations.

*Its wavy, meandering +
includes eclectic.*

Arts-based research can provide a perspective or interpretation of a subject that extends outside of the expected, the traditional, the known. It allows re-imagining of previously understood or codified topics, ideas, concepts.

The research was conducted with eight focus groups that engaged a total of seventeen participants in collage as a form of eliciting narratives about their student experience. An explicit effort was made to establish a warm, relaxed atmosphere with food and music and in which the student researchers participated fully in the process with the volunteer participants, thus going some way towards minimizing the distance between the researchers and the researched. It was each of the SERT researchers' first time facilitating focus groups, and the staff supervisors of the project were not in the room during the focus groups, giving full authority and flow over to the undergraduates in the room themselves. Participants were introduced to the SERT project and ideals then given some basic instruction about the making of collage, provided with all materials and then asked to make two collages, representing in turn the following questions: A) What did you envision coming into post-secondary education? B) What is your actual lived experience as a Ryerson student? Through the making of these collages and the ensuing reflective conversations, we hoped to elicit responses and stories from students about their expectations and experiences in university and whether there were interesting relationships to be noticed.

Each focus group was recorded and transcribed and subjected to a narrative analysis. Our preference for narrative analysis was guided by the idea that it best captures our desire for nuance and illuminating complexity. This idea is expressed well by Janine Wiles, Mark Rosenberg and Robin Kearns (2005) who describe narrative analysis as a way to "...interpret and construct the world around us through interactive talk. Examining what individuals have to say about their personal experience provides us with useful insights into social and spatial processes and events. Most researchers also emphasize the ambiguity of narrative, in the sense that there are several aspects to a narrative and that by examining these we can obtain a richer understanding of events and how they are described" (p. 90).

Our data analysis process unfolded according to a complex set of influences. On the one hand, we were committed to providing a meaningful learning experience for the undergraduate researchers which required an exposure to and discussion of methodological choices and the power inherent in these choices. We spent a good deal of time discussing the non-neutrality of method. We were very aware of operating inside a culture with a strong predisposition for the “scientific method” as the gold standard, but were inclined ourselves towards a more narrative, storytelling approach. We made some compromises here by imposing a kind of loose thematic analysis upon the “data” as an apparatus of sense-making that smacked of greater legitimacy. This process became useful as we further engaged with the student stories and developed our collective interpretation. This was very much an interpretive exercise - so we situated ourselves fully at the outset, acknowledging our positions and predispositions.

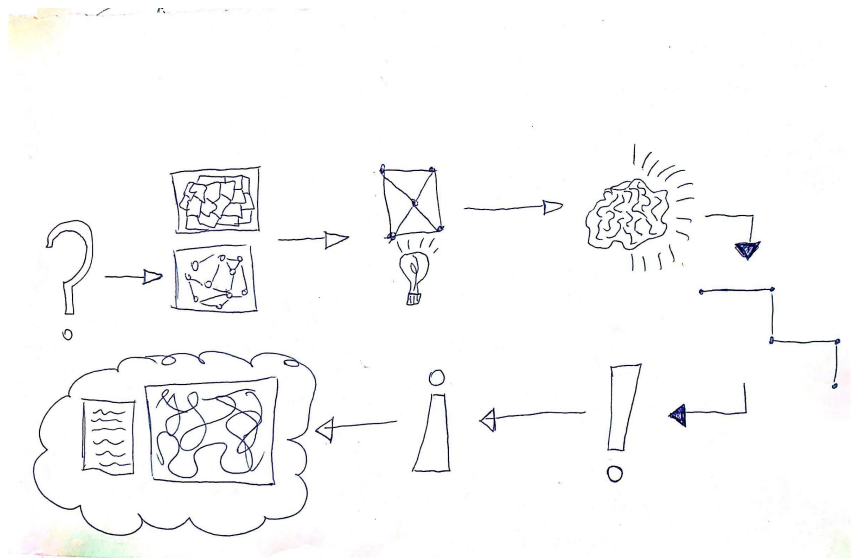
The data consisted of the following:

- Audio recordings of the focus groups
- Video recordings of the focus groups
- The collages themselves
- The observer recording sheets (see Appendix D)

And the analysis upon that data happened in the following stages:

- Extensive post focus-group discussions to get familiar with the “data”
- Individual “collage-only analyses” - a visual/thematic interpretation of the collages themselves using a recording sheet (see Appendix A)
- Intensive review of all recordings while making interpretive notes
- Extensive group discussion to identify thematic codes and use of those codes to further analyze the recordings (see code list in the Findings section)
- Individual “narrative/thematic analyses” of the participant stories, including a thematic “coding” of each story using our code list (see Appendix B)
- Creation of a master recording sheet in which all individual analyses were grouped and coded themes could be clustered across all research participant stories (see Appendix C)
- Each researcher was then randomly assigned to the data of two research participants and conducted an individual interpretation represented in story form, each story found in full in this report
- Presentation of these stories to research participants for feedback

This process proved very robust as a way to come at the participant stories from various angles, viewed through the lenses of individual researchers, but also interpreted through collective analyses. It provided various devices to dig deep into the participant narratives and obtain that richer understanding we were seeking. Naturally, we were concerned with and influenced by traditional notions of credibility here, so we attended to techniques towards this end - prolonged engagement, persistent observation, data collection triangulation, researcher triangulation, and peer debriefing as an external check (Nowell et al, 2017). We were also aware of the contrived nature of some of our interpretive devices imposed upon the “data” and fully acknowledge the objectifying nature of this. Still, while we would likely tweak this process in future, for greater efficiency, we felt it was methodologically sound for our central purpose of helping to “...make vivid what one had not noticed...” (Eisner & Barone, 2012, p. 156).



Arts based research creatively
connects the lines we didn't know
existed.

Findings and Insights

It became clear quite quickly that each participant could, in some way, relate to our inquiry, to this phenomenon of dissonance between expectations and reality of the post-secondary experience. Our hypothesis was that, for some students, this dissonance, this gap between expectations and reality can generate a persistent sense of disorientation and be a difficult thing to resolve. The insights of the student researchers, implicated in the research so personally as students themselves experiencing some of these things, contributed to our conviction here. The testimony of the focus group participants, while going some way towards confirming this hypothesis, also complicated it in interesting ways.

The first set of findings has to do with an interrogation of the things that actually form the expectations of students as they contemplate entering post-secondary education. Here we mostly relied on the testimony of both the student researchers and the focus group participants as they recalled their own experiences. This reliance on remembered selves became a further complicating factor. Each participant admitted to the imperfections of memory here, and there was an evident entanglement between remembered selves and the in-the-moment feelings. But, through the collage and discussion exercise, the conversation did turn to the features that formed each participant's expectations, starting with the most obvious of these - the Ryerson marketing material itself.

It is true that most institutes of higher education spend a lot of time, energy, and money on brand development. And this branding exercise plays a significant role in influencing a prospective student's expectations - indeed, this is the goal of branding. Ryerson is no different in this regard, stating that the purpose of the branding story is what students "...will come to believe about Ryerson University based on all of the signals that our brand sends out" (Ryerson University, 2019). This is powerful and can convey some of the good and true virtues of campus life, but it can also reduce the complexities of student experience to cliché. In their book about higher education marketing strategies, the marketing firm I60over90 cites the ubiquitous "Three and Tree" imagery seen in campus brochures everywhere. Here's a Ryerson version ("Three and a Pepper").





With some tongue in cheek, they cite other cliches like “three and a tree plus two dudes playing frisbee” (Ryerson’s version is Quidditch).



And smiling students in classrooms...

...or around campus...



A perusal of the Ryerson University archival material reveals that this approach to branding, presenting a kind of sanitized version of university life, while having evolved in keeping with the times, nevertheless has a history.



(From “The Ryerson Story” 1956)



Also raised in the focus group discussions were the portrayals of student life in popular media...



...about partying...

And, of course, the participants raised, in various ways, other threads of influence - the word of parents, caregivers, teachers, guidance counsellors, siblings, friends, often also guilty of cliches about the bureaucracy (“you’ll just be a statistic”), or the uncaringness (“nobody will look out for you”), or the grandiosity (“it will change your life”), or the promises of social connection (“you’ll form your most lasting friendships of your life”). And so on.



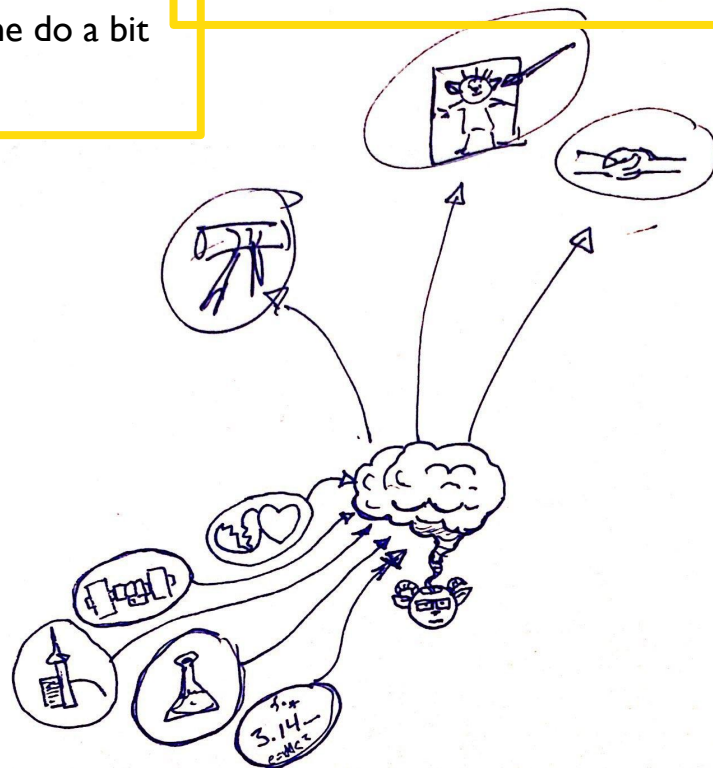
...or being overwhelmed with work...

Within the complex context of these discussions as students contemplated the gap between their expectations and actual lived experience, we were able to identify several recurring and evident themes emerging from the testimony which we named: **Belonging, Place, Connection, Fear, Hopefulness, Learning, Struggle, Identity, Transformation, Resilience, User Experience, Turning Points, Career, Ritual/Routine, Health, and Confidence.**

And, after our layered, triangulated processes of analysis described above, the final output came in the form of stories told by the researchers. Each researcher was assigned two student participants and, using all available “data” related to those participants, pulled together a final interpretive narrative.

Each of us created our story in our own format, so some read like accounts from the participants themselves, some read as summary accounts of the stories, and some do a bit of both.

These stories follow in the next pages. They include narrative interpretations, speaking with and about our makers' experiences and the stories they shared with us.



I'm nervous to be here. But I'm here.



Collage "6A"

INHALE. Hesitation would describe how I feel right now. I entered Ryerson University with lots of hesitation, and I'm here, apart of this focus group with lots of hesitation. After all, I AM a mature student. This isn't my first time in post-secondary but, this time around, life for me looks a lot different. I have kids now – 5, and I also live miles and miles away, in a different city. How am I going to do this? Have I made the right decision? What are my options? The challenges of trying to sustain a life balancing motherhood and pursuing an education within a system that is vastly different the one I navigated almost two decades ago. Hesitation seems to be filling my lungs, but it's not stopping me from breathing.

Actually, it ain't so bad over here.

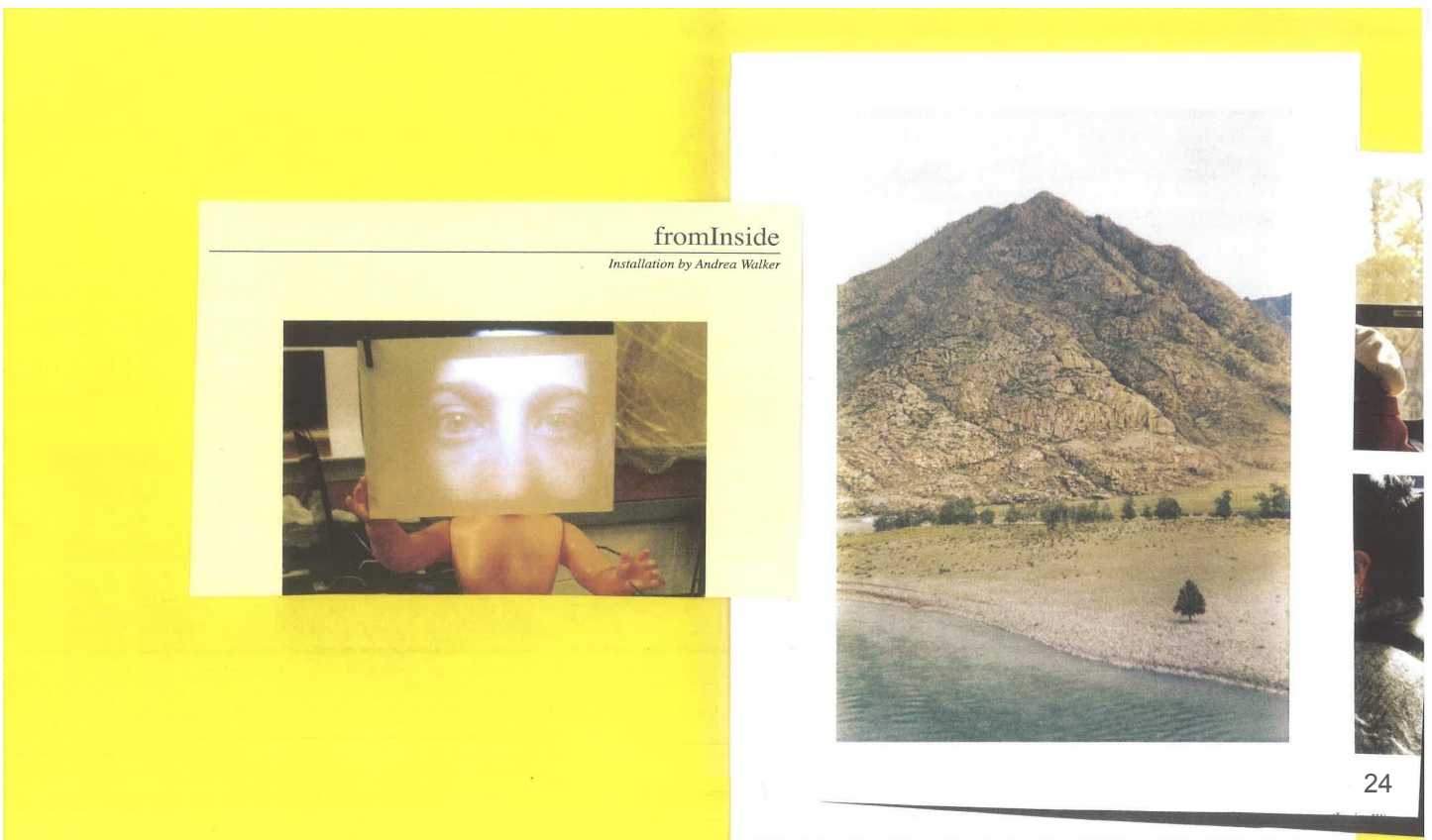
EXHALE. Woah, I'm here and it's not too bad. I'm present in this process and I'm aware of my full potential. My creative juices are flowing. I know and live by my truth as a student and I'm seeing so much of myself. It feels good to tap into my experience through this medium – turns out that I'm craftier than I thought I was. All the participants seem to be impressed with what I was able to come up with. Not gonna lie, so AM I. This storybook of my life seems to be filled with waves – some clashing, some smooth sailing and I'm glad that I'm able to experience it and showcase it to the world.



Inside pages of Collage “6B”



Inside pages of Collage "6B"







Collage "4A"

I came into this field as a baby. The soil was fertile, so it nurtured my development. I began to take shape, of my becoming. And crawled into the world with little foresight of what my journey would look, be, or feel like. Injury to the body and system is inevitable, and so is the self-protection and defense mechanisms that immediately occur after that.

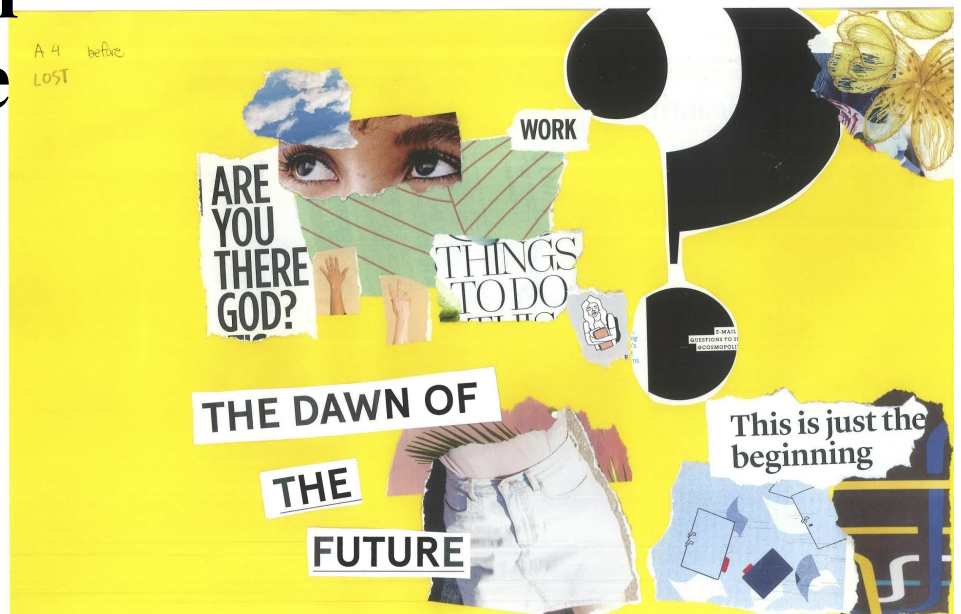
Pupa turns into a butterfly, butterfly leaves the cocoon, adult butterfly

Although this soil nurtured my development, my resilience is what nurtured my growth. I isolated a bit until I was ready to be vulnerable with what I was carrying inside. As the world held me, I was able to witness the new form of life I was carrying inside of me. This time around, I had wings and intricate patterns that beautifully highlighted exactly who I was. The shell that I built up around myself was no longer necessary. Here I was. Here I am, ready to fly.



Collage "4B"

“Coming in I felt a little lost, so I put these hands in my collage that are, like reaching. It sounds kind of cheesy, but I felt like I was reaching for some higher universe to tell me what was going to happen.”



Collage “A4 Before” or “Lost”

This is a story about shifting identity - from reaching outside for guidance to finding one’s voice, from a hesitant questioning to a higher sense of purpose, from asking the usual questions about readiness to finding new questions about one’s place in the world, from anticipation to immersion, from a narrow palette to a full range of colour. The tension between expectation and reality here lies in the kinds of questions being posed. The pre-arrival questions being about readiness - Where am I? - shifting to questions about identity - Who am I? Perhaps these questions about identity are not top-of-mind when anticipating the university experience as we are not typically primed to ask these kinds of questions. So we stick to the traditional script about preparedness, fear, and excitement. And, for some, this line of inquiry can shift into questions about identity, about one’s place in the world, in relationship to others. And this shift in focus, that comes seemingly by surprise, can be a dizzying experience.



Collage “A4 After” or “Almost Found”

“I feel like at this point of my university life I am trying to figure out who I am. And I realized that the world is full of colour, in a very important way”



Collage "9A"

**“So this is, like, my anger I guess,
about all of this.”**

This is a story about zooming out and discovering the unexpected joys in the wider focus. The sentiments surrounding the anticipating student were narrowly focused on the deficiencies of their chosen profession, the polluting and elitist aspects of the fashion industry. It's all grounded in an evident positivity, but hued with a bit of tension, an inclination towards critique and frustration. The identified themes upon analysis centred a lot around career and fear - a kind of apprehension or questioning about the industry that simultaneously appeals and repulses. Then, in the second collage, there is an interesting shift, a zooming out to a broader view that seems more in keeping with the participant's personality - a very buoyant focus on connections and community and the mutual support of friends. In the zooming out we go from the cold material world to the warmth and intimacy of human connection. Is this a common experience for students? This widening focus on friendships, on enjoying the process and the time here instead of fixating on the end-goal?

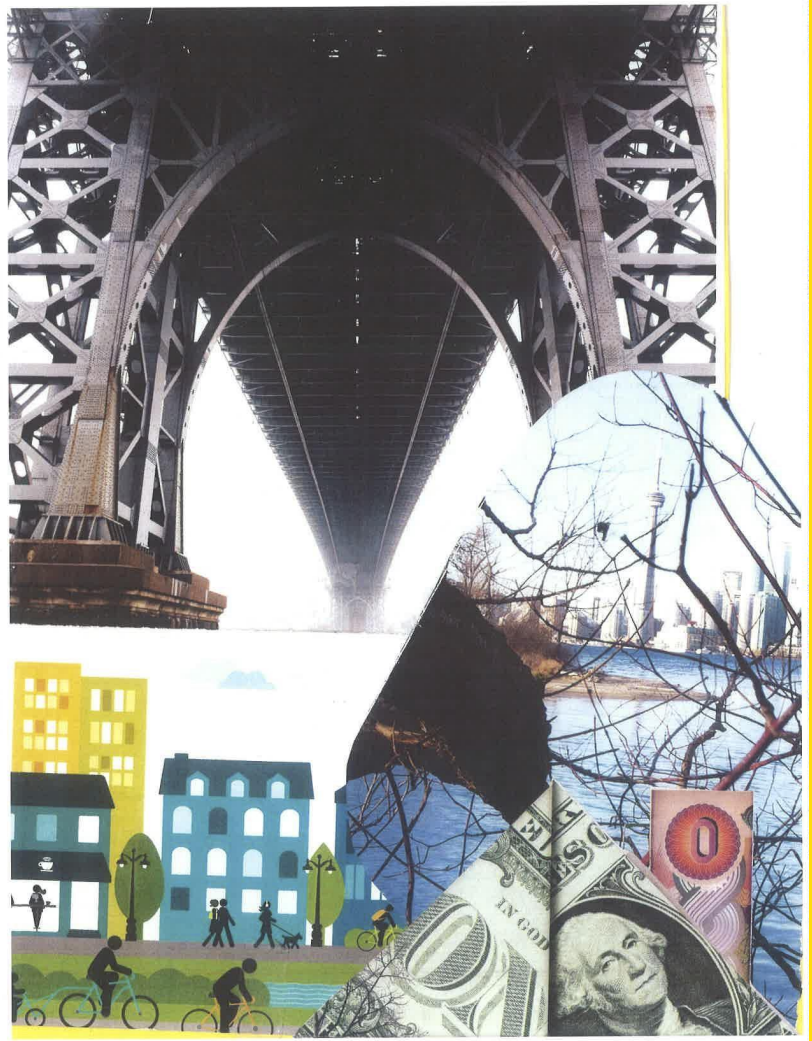
“It made me realize that it’s just the beginning and I’m still young with so much life to live and I can go in different directions.”



Collage “9B”

“The bridge represented a bit of uncertainty, but also that Ryerson is far away because I live in the suburbs.”

This participant only commuted downtown for the important stuff because they live in the suburbs. They entered Ryerson with a bit of uncertainty (as exemplified with the bridge), and believed the university to be far away from where they live. They experienced unsettledness entering the university (branches covering the city), and they were uncertain about what university life at Ryerson would be like. Financially (currency), they entered university not knowing exactly how they would pay for everything. They did however pay keen attention to the community life of downtown Toronto. This participant was originally going to go to UofT, and the media and the “Rye High Narrative” influenced the ways through which they thought about Ryerson. However, they made a decision they felt would be best for them. The primary themes connected to their first collage are those of “Place” and “Uncertainty”.

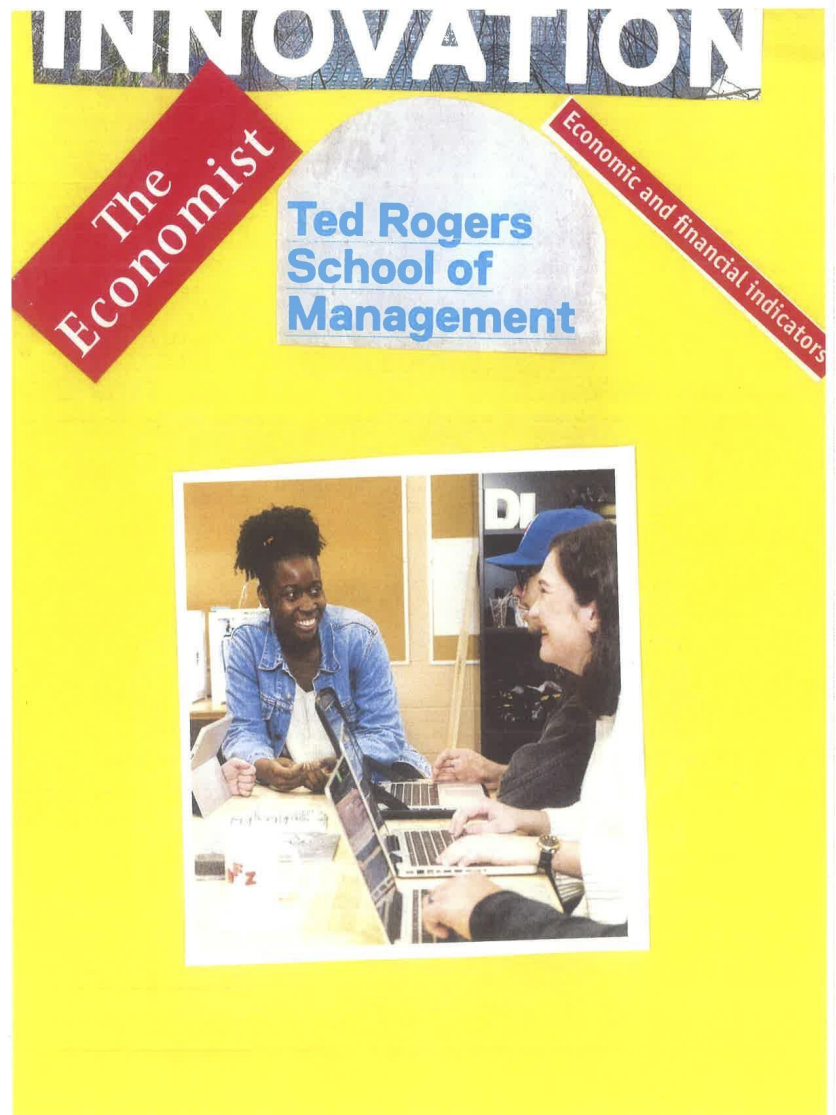


Collage “IA”

It seemed as if the location of Ryerson represented deeper meanings for them, particularly regarding their home. This participant discusses their uncertainty about the school, and the uncertainty around student life. For their process, they saw a few elements that really stood out to them and cut them out to convey how they were feeling. This maker was yearbook editor in high school, so they described the care they took not to place too many elements on the paper for the collage.

**“It is all pretty
much
collaboration
now.”**

This participant's current university experience is much different from that of before and during their first year. Before their first year, they were in Chang school (continuing education) courses, and group members were more motivated than typical first year students due to their ages and motivations for taking courses. Now, the maker finds The Ted Rogers School of Management is all about consulting and fixing business problems. It seems as if they are now more confident in their abilities as a student. They value collaboration and networking at Ryerson. They believe that their schedule and life is more structured now. This collage is more positive than the first, as they are more accustomed to Ryerson student life. They have acclimated with the business of the TRSM. Some major themes of this collage are “Connection” and “Learning”. This participant feels connected to the university through the TRSM. They are actively participating at school and attend business events put on by their faculty. They have also learned how to adapt to a more structured schedule.



Collage “IB”

“University humbled me.”

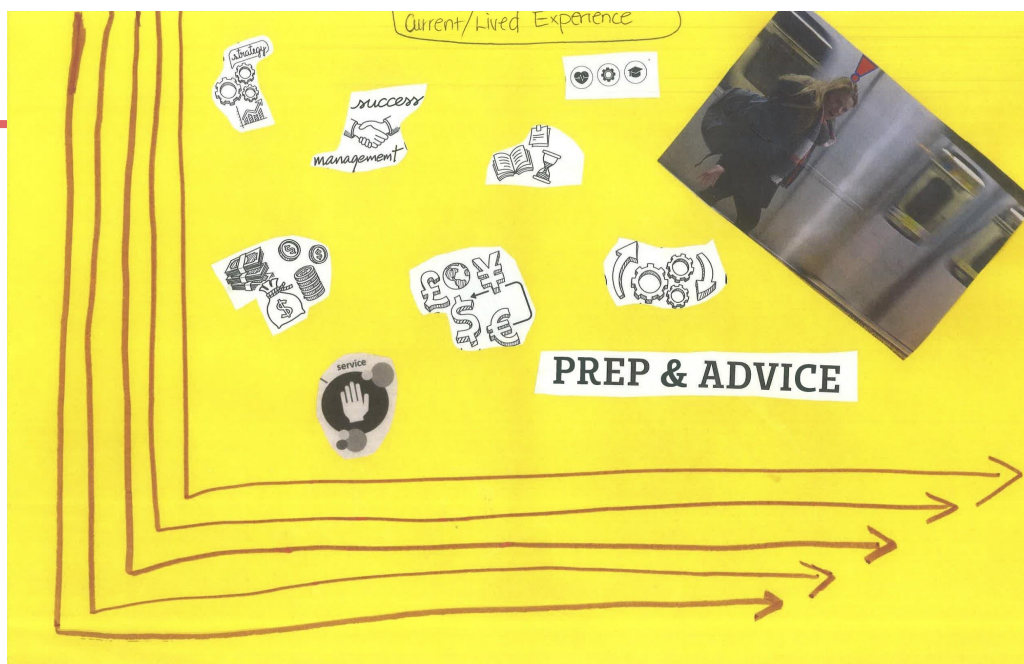


Collage “B3 Before”

This participant was valedictorian in high school and entered university with a level of confidence, believing that it would be easy to juggle all the school work. They were used to reading the textbook and applying what they learned, and doing well. Although they did well in high school, they soon realized that university was not as easy as they thought it would be. The work loads were significantly different, as well as the new material that they were learning. The maker describes expecting to have a large group of friends coming into Ryerson (image representing friendship and companionship). They thought it would be easy to juggle numerous elements entering Ryerson but realized that they could not keep everything up (image of the guy juggling). They envisioned that they would get plenty of time to party and go out on the weekends; turned 18, they felt like an adult. But they realized that they could not leave whenever they wanted as they still lived in their parent's house and their schedule was too busy to enable the time to do so (image of the circus). The participant's initial plan was to finish nursing and go to medical school. However, they now feel less inclined to pursue medical school, as they do not want to extend their years of schooling. The maker knows they can do it, but they now feel that that would not be fulfilling their purpose. They want to have a family and does not want to start their career too late. The participant's family were persuading them to pursue medicine. In their first year, the maker described being “complacent”, and not worrying too much when they noticed a drop in their grades. After some time, though, university truly humbled her. The diversity on campus exceeded their expectations out of all the elements. They wanted to work with children in their placement but found great joy instead working with the elderly population. So, university really allowed them to see which avenues they wanted to go into. While creating their pieces, the maker saw elements that stood out to them intuitively and placed them on the collage.

“University is not something to depress yourself over.”

University really taught the maker new strategies on how to time manage properly. They valued stress management and physical health management. The participant describes starting to go to the gym more often and beginning deep breathing exercises. They will be graduating soon and are excited about that period. They have a new agenda that they use to track progress and yet also realizes that no matter how much they plan, things will always get in the way (as represented with the hourglass). All their planning won't necessarily mean things will go the way they want them to. The maker found ways to make money on campus to help cover costs before graduation. They have travelled with family and friends, as represented with the currency images. In their desired profession, they will be providing services to individuals in need. The turning gears remind and encourage them to keep going and that things are constantly changing. When the participant failed a course, they had to redo the course over again. However, they describe receiving such a high mark in the course the second time that they now tutor for that particular course. They view this experience as a testimony (seen in the words “prep and advice”). They have a love hate relationship with the subway, hating how packed it is and they are anxious for graduation when they can take a break from Ryerson. They drew the lines on the collage to remind themselves to keep going no matter what happens. They believe that individuals will always get another chance. When describing their collage process, they said they looked through the magazine and saw what spoke to them. This collage is a bit more organized than the previous one. It seems as if they are surer of what they want, who they are, and what they need to do to get where they need to go. They now understand how to adapt to Ryerson. The first collage would be “the first page” and the second would be “the last page of a journal entry.” Their expectations did not match the reality of how life works but they now find greater joy in their lived experiences.



Collage “B3 After”

“Definitely not the end”

Each collage begins with a premise or simply an image on a piece of paper. Like a jigsaw puzzle, the composition evolves, a single piece at a time. This artist continues to cut, crop, and manipulate possible elements, making decisions about what works and what is needed next to complete the composition. It's as though this artist has two sides, two incompatible faces, they are expressive yet restrained, complex yet simple. The letter “A” represents the grades obtained by classes this artist enjoys whereas the letter “C” represents grades obtained in classes this artist doesn't enjoy as much, such as liberals or electives. The image of people floating on the lake represents group work. This artist explains the importance of communication and sharing of different perspectives when it comes to group work, and how the reality is that there are usually 2 or 3 individuals leading the way or in other words, “rowing the boat”. Within the space of each image, the audience is pulled out of a logical and common world and placed within a space of speculation. The image of a cyclist represents commuting to and from Ryerson but also represents the importance of maintaining a healthy lifestyle.



Collage “C2 Before”

“Always learning, always evolving.”

This artist believes there is beauty in the simplest things in life be it self-care rituals, exercise or cooking healthy nutritious meals. When choosing an image this artist looks for elements that capture and images that will evoke the same feeling with the viewer. Simple concepts are molded into something magnetic and complex. The calendar represents the struggle of effectively managing time as a student and the sacrifices that have to be made in order to ensure strict deadlines are met. There seems to be no specific "goal" or intent when this artist began creating the collage - it's more as though they were letting the images find each other and facilitating their communion as they "spoke" to each other. More than anything else, this process requires vast attention to detail, so as to be ready to capture the dialogue for their audience and represent their identity and transformation into becoming a university student.

“Before a test, you’re just on fire.”



Collage “C2 After”

Beyond the Portrait of Post-Secondary

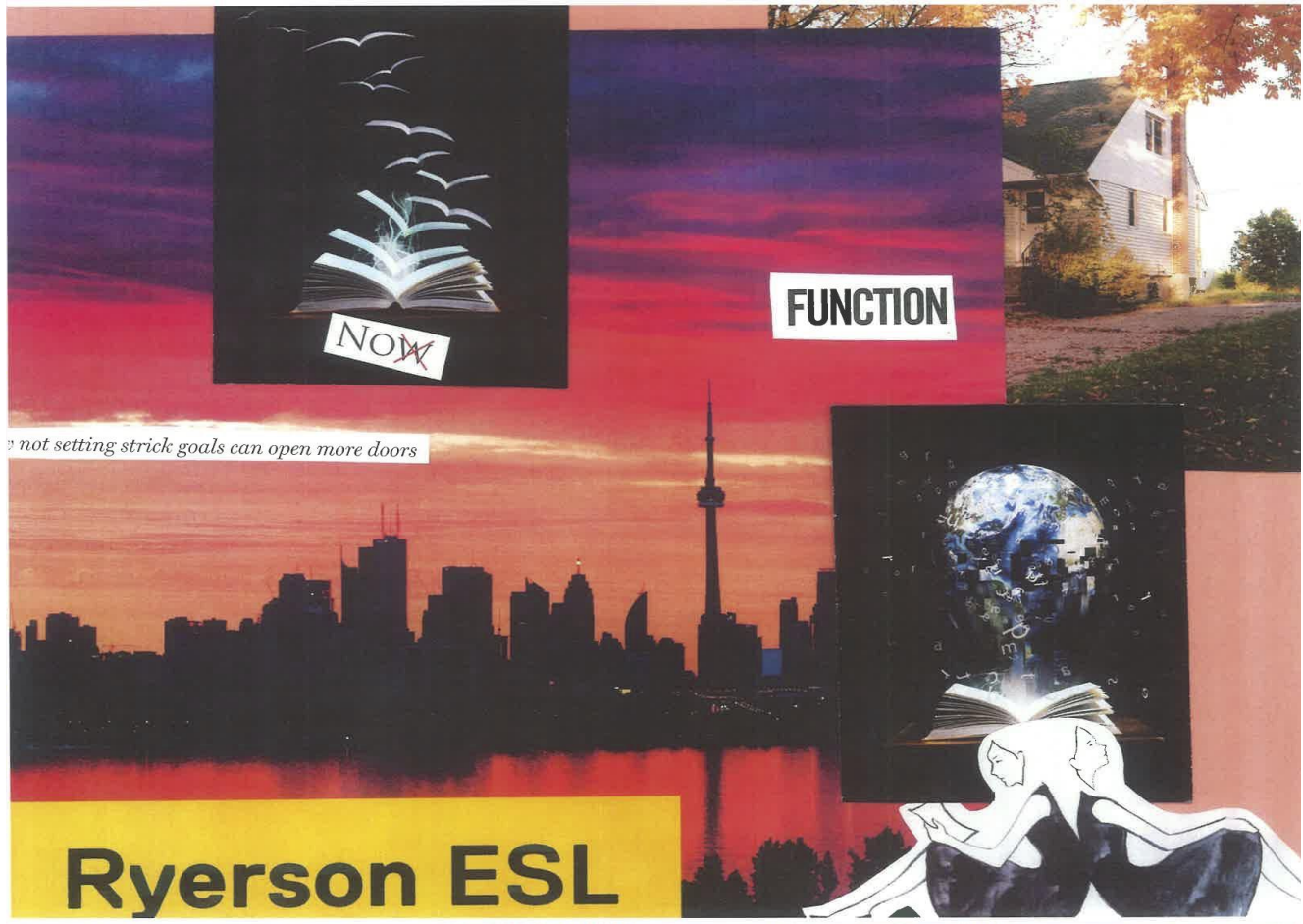


Collage "2A"

Upon entering a post-secondary institution, this artist realized that what started out as enthusiasm and assurance somehow became hopelessness.

Many of the images unveil secretive beauty and pain. Pain from losing a scholarship they worked so hard to obtain. However, this tragic experience blossomed into new relationships, experiences and ultimately, success. This artist was left to simply explore and discover who they truly are. As time passed, this artist discovered an unexpected reality, where "not setting strict goals" opened many more doors for them. The images uncover the intimate interactions that can occur between expectations and reality.

“Take your own path.”



Collage "2B"

The arrangements of each image invite the audience to move into a space of speculation. Emotion is felt as the artist explains how they feel as though Ryerson is almost too good to be true because it turned out to be the perfect balance between learning and creating. Learning from previous mistakes and creating your own path into the future.

Rearranged realities, assembled moments, and constructed views are composed in these collages. The work reflects and informs hopefulness, identity, and transformation. There is an unexpected beauty of everyday materials from their original context, salvaged, and repurposed. The images are like instruments playing a united melody. The visual and the literal inform and shed light on to each other. The words "Ryerson ESL" represent the fact that university felt like a second language to this artist and how difficult it was to adjust to university life during first year.

Fragile Expectations

The key themes across the participant's collages are struggle and user-experience - the story focuses on the participant's dissatisfaction with university systems, bureaucracy, and surprise at the disorganized nature of an institution such as Ryerson. Our maker came prepared with a specific story and experiences to share. The first collage, which was titled "Fragile Expectations" appears hopeful on its own, but when accompanied by the participant's story, it's hard to see it as such; instead, it feels a bit sad, a bit ironic.

While creating the first collage, the maker was thinking about **"what you're going to be about"** when embarking on an education. They were thinking about things like developing a brand, collaborating with peers, and exploring the creative and business side of his industry. But, just about right away their "fragile expectations" weren't fulfilled - there was no time for collaboration; the intensity of their program didn't leave room for getting involved outside the classroom; and attempting to navigate the university's systems and bureaucracy left them feeling confused and jaded.

Our maker describes an intense frustration and disappointment in the institution at large and their disdain for the disorganized systems and supports they've interacted with. They feel frustrated by their peers, too, for their perceived lack of professionalism, for not taking their education seriously - the maker expected a certain professionalism which **"I found to be largely unfulfilled."** The frustration expressed by our artist while describing their collage is aimed at just about every level of the institution - broad, systems challenges, their peers, and their program.

The artist had a clear process - they'd made a list of grievances they wanted to address in their collage, especially the one representing the "reality" of their experiences. For example, making that second collage they **"Tried to highlight all of the facets of the challenges. All of the problems that I find there are... And how [help] is hard to come by. Unless you really know what you're doing - like for student support, for example, I don't think there's a holistic approach, enough, at Ryerson."**



Collage "3A" or "Fragile Expectations"

Welcome to Hell

The artist expresses how their challenges with the institution make them concerned for fellow students who might have an even harder time navigating the challenges that they did - if they had a hard time, **“Imagine someone with an even higher level of anxiety [than me].”** The participant offers suggestions, like a more holistic approach to student support, and relates this to what they see as a lack of accountability on the institution to address student concerns - **“You expect people to be able to help you with authority and power and to facilitate what you want to do. When that falls short in major ways, it's disheartening.”** It's clear that the participant wanted to share their experience as a way to be heard and have a voice in improving the experience for other students.

The pieces themselves express their meanings differently - the second collage uses symbolism and metaphor, and the elements interact with each other more than the first in which each item stands more or less alone and represents a more obvious meaning. Our maker crafted their pieces with intention - in “Welcome to Hell”, they describe **“The first thing I saw was this woman with her head in a bowl of water - sometimes this is what it feels like in my program; like we are drowning. The workload is unreal and we don't always have the tools to approach it.”**

Overall, our artist's experience has been challenging and they've identified many areas that left them feeling frustrated and feeling like **“It does not need to be so hard.”** They are questioning how to continue being enthusiastic about their academic journey - they do want to be in their program of study - when you are constantly disappointed by the institution and its inner-workings at large. They said, **“I'm really critical of my program - I like it, I want to be there, but at the same time I have to be critical of it.”** The artist credits these inefficiencies as unnecessary roadblocks to success and to a healthy, holistic experience of post-secondary education.

“Then” and “Now”

The artist who created “B1 before” and “B1 after” describe both their work and their experiences as centred around themes of learning and transformation. They identify “growth” and “the future” right off the bat as the starting points for their collages and reflection of their post-secondary experiences. While telling their story, our maker has a clear idea of how they have changed and grown throughout their post-secondary time.



Collage “B1 Before” or “Then”

Our artist has a keen sense of reflection and believes individual experiences shape individual perspectives, and credits growing and learning that to their experiences at Ryerson; by the second collage the maker has an increased focus, understands a diversity of perspectives, and has gained confidence. They are future-oriented in a hopeful way - but not fixed to a plan, rather it's like a bold “going forth” attitude. I hear a preparedness to embark on new challenges, which seems to come from having experienced growth and identity transformation throughout their university experience.

Our maker is one of the only participants to specifically identify media representations of the post-secondary experience as the source of their expectations coming into university. The participant describes expecting lots of “parties and fun” both in their story and in their first collage itself - but that expectation wasn't met in their actual personal experience. Interestingly, the participant doesn't seem to lament this as something missed out on, rather they describe how some students, sure, experience that sort of post-secondary but in their case, that's not what Ryerson was. They also expected more competition, more rigour, but found that fellow students didn't work as hard as they'd anticipated, relying on networking instead; they found their faculty clique-ey rather than community oriented and found Ryerson's campus lacking a community-feeling as well, saying “[Ryerson] doesn't really have a campus. It's just downtown.”

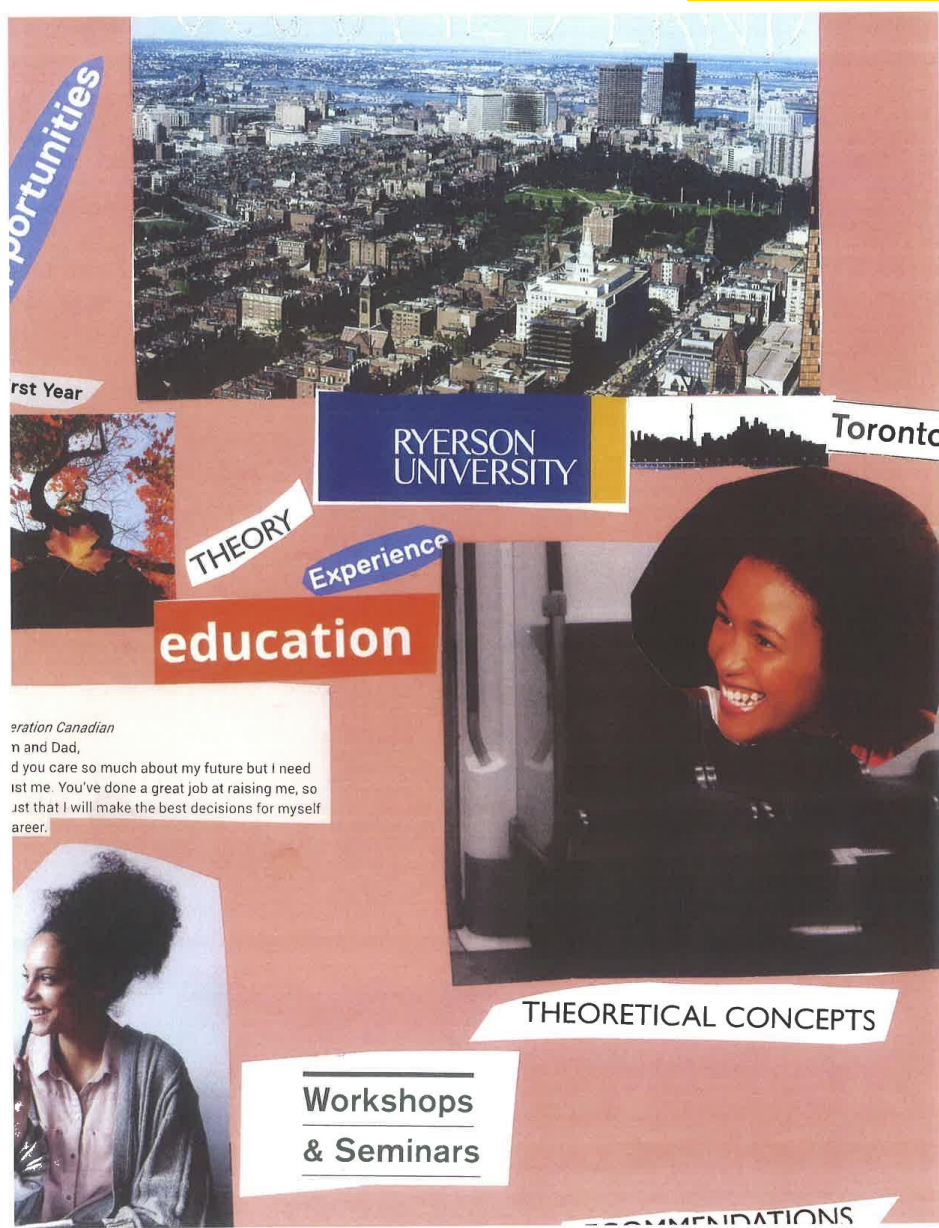
Their main expectation or goal, however, seems to have been met throughout their experience - namely that they would grow, learn, and widen their perspectives. The maker came in with the idea that they'd be experiencing something that would set them up for the future, and that major growth would take place in university. "I expected my confidence levels to go up." This is consistent with their actual experience as they describe having learned that life is about "Feeling comfortable in an uncomfortable environment." Furthermore, they've developed a wider view of the student (or human) experience, saying "There's no such thing as a universal student experience." They are also cautious, now, of the way entering university (or entering situations) with specific expectations can "...set yourself up for disaster. Versus now, taking everything as it comes."

Our artist sounds prepared, eager even to continue learning and growing beyond post-secondary. "I'm aligning myself with who I want to be and where I see myself in the future. I'll always continue learning. I'm not sure where I'm headed now - stepping into a whole different world. This time I'm just going to step through and find out."



Collage "BI After" or "Now"

Great Expectations



Collage "5A"

"Dear Mom and Dad,
I'm glad you care so much about my future but I need you to trust me. You've done a great job at raising me, so please trust that I will make the best decisions for myself and my career." The participant's parents were key players in their journey and life, and their journey to independence is represented by this powerful quote found on the collage.

The participant spoke with joy as their story unfolded, excited to be sharing their experiences as a first year coming into university. Clear at the outset, they were very sure of their opinions and path. Independence was a key theme that emerged from the first collage; the need to be independent shaped their expectations of what university would be like. The city represented independence, creating excitement and wonder about what living on one's own means, thus the main theme enacted was **place**. The maker is a keen observer of their environment and that which surrounds them. This participant identified as both a first generation university student and having a learning disability; they said Ryerson's resources were very helpful for them. They saw everything as an opportunity, starting off their journey incredibly hopeful and optimistic. Their expectations became more grounded after beginning university. Their focus coming into university altered from grades and independence, to a realistic interpretation of what that meant for them: learning self-care in the wake of school and an independent lifestyle.

A word based exploration, the creator connected their experiences to found words and created their own meanings out of them. Each specific word is connected to a different personality trait or experience. The creator's connection to their lived experience was centred on finding support as they find themselves – self-actualization being a goal. Finding support, the participant speaks of the Thriving in Action program and how they hope to apply the strategies they learned. Through finding said support programs within Ryerson and their new environment, the participant learned to voice their needs and be a little more self supportive in their desires. For example, they began focusing on their outside interests besides academics, including dance, guitar circle, art, etc. They joined another Ryerson program – Mood Routes – because of a new desire to experience more green space. While they still love the city, they found it necessary to experience a version of oasis within the hustle of the city life; **place** is still a key theme here. The maker's use of positive and optimistic language hints that they have really found part of herself they couldn't quite actualize before. This new outlook though is more matured and reflective, rather than pure excitement: they were more a listener in first year, but are now ready to join the conversation. Their overall goal, while still accelerating in school, is connection and engagement with others while taking agency over their own life. Themes of **transition** are present.

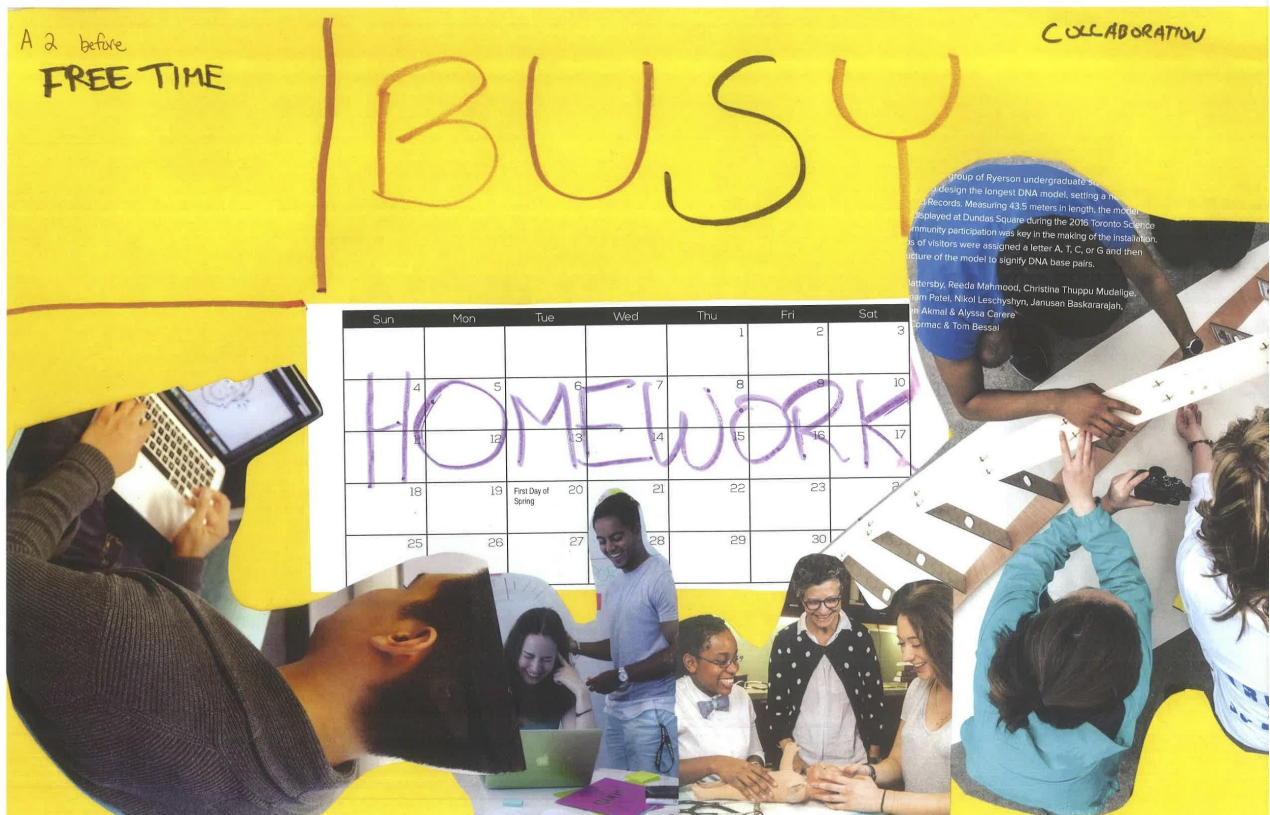


Collage "5B"

The staying power of knowledge

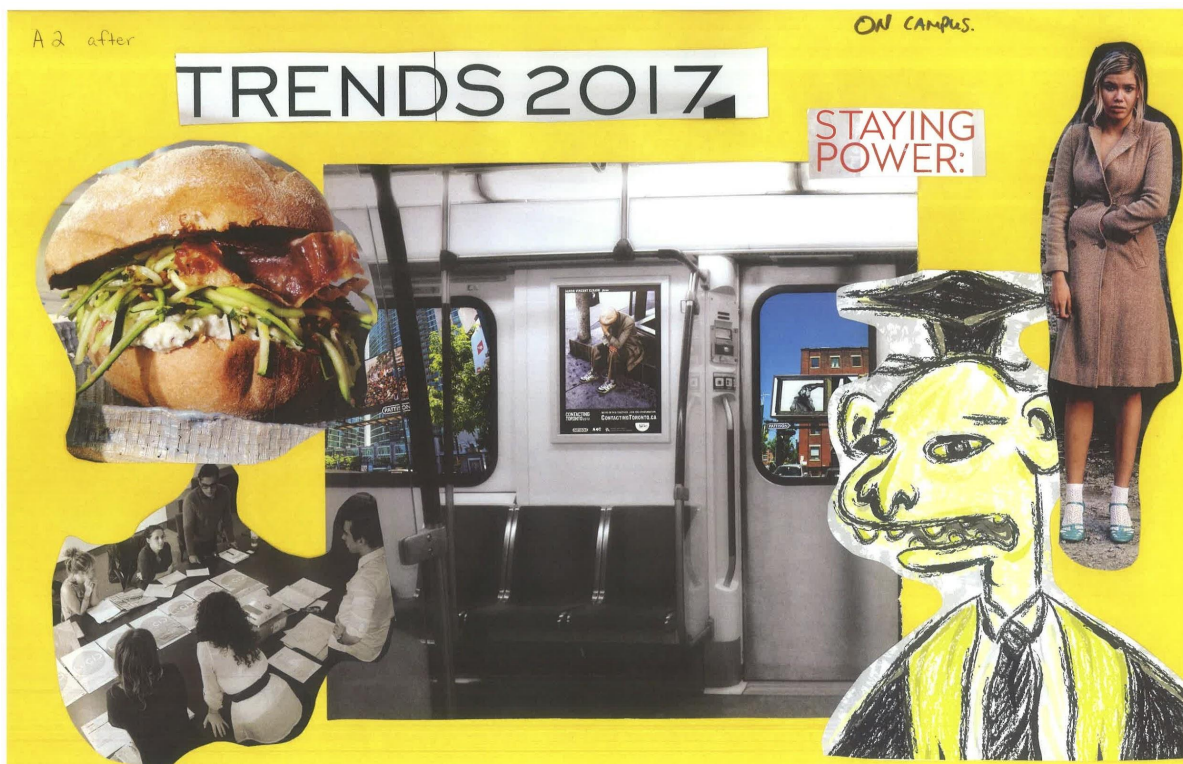
COLLABORATION - The participants' interpretations were very literal and straight to the point; one can tell this is their method of interpretation and thinking. Their process making the collage started with a single word exploration: busy. They describe expecting to be busy coming into university, and that they were indeed. The maker expected to have a rather cut and dry experience in university given that their purpose was academically oriented; they describe group work, having little free time for social life, and a busy schedule with academics. The most prominent themes are **struggle** and **learning**. The visual representation is simple and stark, clear. The themes truly emerge from their experience being busy within the confines of Ryerson academics. The appearance is mimicked through the explanation of the collage: literal and stark. The participant does hint at introspection, reflecting on their childhood when looking at a fellow participant's collage which said "Are you there, God?" The participant also related to the symbolism of the escalator, in a fellow participant's collage. They noted that the transition of becoming one's self, starting from the bottom and growing as you create your journey, relates to this imagery.

Collage "A2 Before"



ON CAMPUS - Given that the participant spoke more of their academics in the first collage, they chose to communicate more about lifestyle in the second collage. Their mindset and thinking process was still very indifferent, yet to the point; they knew what they wanted to say. The participant's collage was very much about self-reflection and identification. They describe themselves as out of touch/out of date with the trends of modern life. They explained what the university lifestyle means to them, and how that is reflected in their life currently. The participant not only explains this through cultural trends, but specifically through fashion trends and their lack of attention to them. Two of the main events that came up were food and commuting. They spend a lot of time around Ryerson's fast food joints, because of the busy school lifestyle mentioned in the first collage story. The participant continues to discuss their relationship with Ryerson as a campus - being a place they spend much of their time. **Place** is an essential theme. They touch on academics again, but more so in the respect of the culmination and completion. They truly believe in the "staying power of knowledge", thus why they are so academically focused and inclined in their lifestyle. As an observer, one can tell the participant understood collage as a medium a little more and felt more confident in making the second collage. They mentioned the aforementioned comfort in passing. The participant is often so focused on the present and their academic state of mind, the completion of courses or events often symbolize journey and a sense of wonder if things are "really over". It seems that maybe they don't actively think or talk about it much, hence their being unsure of sharing. Throughout both collages though, the participant's main university experiences relate to academics and being a student; they carry a lot of their identity in this relationship.

Collage "A2 After"





Collage “7A”



Collage “7B”

Key themes of these works emerge from the maker's experiences and feelings about their program, their life at school and their feelings about the collage-making process. The first of the maker's collages began as a mirror to their arrival to Ryerson, an empty vessel ready to collect new and interesting experiences. With no expectations other than experiencing "the big city" and dreams of a bright future, our maker distilled those feelings of new beginnings into a collage of their ideas of what city life might be like.

The maker's second collage is striking, the left side capturing the attention with stark images of figures experiencing loneliness, anxiety, and feeling a lack of belonging. Contrasted against this and encircling the simple phrase "thank you" are more vibrant images of city life that convey their experiences of a new sense of belonging in a "larger pack", strengthened bonds with old friends and exploring the nightlife of the city for the first time.

Being new to collage and art-making generally, our maker was initially uncertain about their approach and method to collage, a metaphorical mirror to their experiences as a new student. As the second collage develops, we can see their student experience blossoming as creativity comes alive in their work. They're taking more chances, being more experimental and conveying a confidence not seen in the previous work. Bolder colours and more diverse arrangement provide an excellent vehicle for describing their own transformation in school, from uncertain novice to an experienced student and city-dweller.

Taken together the two pieces tell a compelling story of transformation and growth, literally and figuratively expanding and becoming a more complex form as the viewer transitions from "before" to "after" pieces.

"I felt like part of a larger pack."

“University. Okay, it’s time to grow up, right?”

Our maker’s transition from highschool to university signalled a shift in thinking, a desire to grow and meet new challenges. As the last days of summer faded into fall, a realization started to form: change is coming, it’s time to grow. Having lived in the city all their life, they possessed a sense of familiarity and belonging that helped ground them and provide a sense of place and purpose. Like the changing seasons, our maker entered into a challenging world, sacrificing comforts of a simpler life and a freer youth to built toward a rich season of new growth.



Collage “A3 Before”

*Note: Our artist did not complete a second (or “after”) collage.

“I came in sort of heart-broken, but I was really positive for a new future.”

Our maker took an introspective leap of faith, literally and figuratively, as they transitioned from a small town high-school to university life in Toronto. Seeking purpose and direction, our maker placed their trust in Ryerson and their personal faith to bring about some change, some growth, and exciting transformations in their life. Aiming to capture the somewhat random, chaotic nature of school, their collage reflects this as a smattering of bold images highlight key experiences and expectations they had envisioned. Overcoming their uncertainties, our maker took their first step toward claiming their new identity.



Collage “A5 Before”

*Note: Our maker did not complete a second (or “after”) collage.

“I questioned if university would be ‘home’ or foreign.”

Fear was identified as the most dominant theme for collage 8A. The participant's first collage reflected how the participant battled with the idea of university being a place. *Place* and *Identity* became sub-themes of *Fear*, as they expressed the participant's hesitation about coming to university. The artist expressed that they found themselves questioning whether university would be a place they would feel comfortable in, or if it would be a place that was unfamiliar. When looking at universities, the participant was selective and focused on universities that would make her feel free and comfortable. The participant's collage also reflected the theme of connection. One of the highlights of collage 8A was that images spoke to the artist's expectation of university being a place where they would have the opportunity to connect with people and build friendships. Above all, the participant expressed that their overall understanding of university was that it was a place that would contribute to their success.



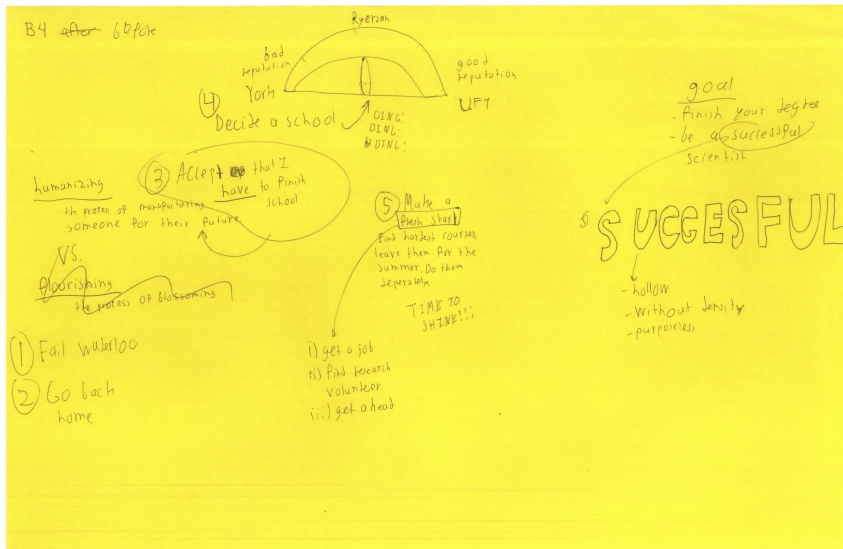
Collage 8B tells the story of balance reflecting the major themes of *Learning* and *Connection*. The artist uses a contrast of colours to reflect the balance of university, with one half of the collage being colourful and the other half being black & white. The colourful half illustrates creativity and the participant's relationship with themselves and their friends. The participant perceived meeting new people and having the capacity to attend events and try new things as the positive aspects of university. The artist referred to the other half being 'grey & depressing'. This half of the collage represents the sub-themes of our research findings, those being *Struggle* and *Resilience*. It is reflective of the challenges and difficulties that students face in university. The artist tells the story of balancing their social and academic life, and how sometimes they have to sacrifice their social life for the academics.

The relationship between collage 8A and 8B is that the artist illustrated that their expectations were met. In collage 8A the participant expressed that they expected to meet friends and to learn more about themselves. This was seen as being fulfilled when interpreting their actual experience in university. The experience collage was less about asking questions and was more focused on understanding their experience. In collage 8B there was no emphasis on whether or not university would be challenging, although the participant identified that going to university contributed to success. In the participant's experience they found that university was difficult and challenging but there was a balance as they also found new friends.



Collage "8A"

“I no longer felt trapped”



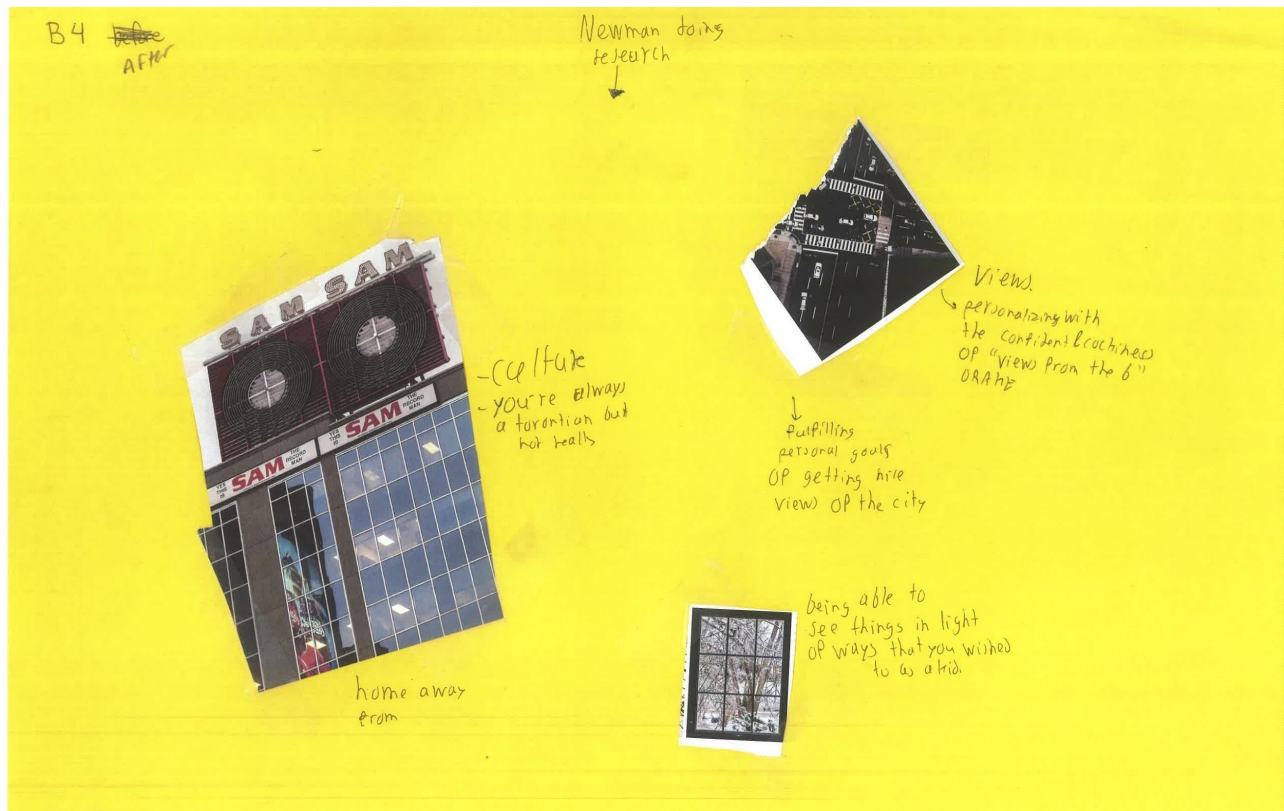
Collage “B4 Before”

Our research findings indicated that *Transformation* and *Resilience* were the two main themes represented this collage. The artist portrays the story of their expectations before coming to Ryerson University using a mind-map like visual. The artist did not follow traditional collage practices but rather used a pen to draw out what was going through their mind as they told their story. Ironically, during this process of collaging the participant mentioned that they have a hard time following the rules. This collage is symbolic of transformation as the collage illustrates the steps that the artist took to get to Ryerson. The artist’s transformation was both physical and mental. Physical due to the participant transferring schools. Mental because the participant transformed their perception and their way of life in terms of accessing mental health resources. The participant expressed that this journey led them to reframe their “personal definition of success.” Their journey to Ryerson allowed them to be intentional in seeking out mental health services. They expressed these services were a necessary step that helped change their life.

The two collages are deeply interconnected. The artist expressed that there was confusion when creating the expectation collage, as this collage reflected his lived experiences and current perception of university. The collage that was originally intended to be their “expectation” ended up being reflective of their actual experience. What is similar in both stories is the theme of Identity. The artist illustrated their journey and how their university experiences helped shape their perceptions of self and life.

“I was intentional about seeking mental health services.”

Collage “B4 After”



Our team discovered that the major themes represented in this collage are Place, Belonging, and Identity. The story speaks about the theme of identity from different perspectives. The collage illustrates how the artist views their own identity, versus their understanding of urban identity. The participant's understanding of urban identity helped shape their understanding of self. The participant shared their experiences of first studying in Hamilton and how that environment played a role on their perception of the city and their mental health. They expressed that their collage illustrated "the idea of the 'Torontonion' Identity, and how understanding this identity helped them connect with and formulate their own understanding of Toronto". The participant felt connected to the Torontonion identity, and mentioned that Hamilton lacked an urban identity that made them feel distant from the city. Whereas the connectedness they had with Toronto translated to them having a positive university experience at Ryerson because they felt a sense of belonging. The participant structured the collage in a way that acknowledged that belonging to communities such as student groups as well as accessing school resources helped them feel comfortable within school. Ryerson opened the participant's mind to their options, and allowed them to develop an understanding that they no longer had to feel trapped into one way of thinking.

After the Stories, More Questions

In a subsequent act of engagement with the research participants, we invited them back to give us their feedback about these stories. Those who took us up on that offer were struck by the process, and were moved by hearing these narratives read back to them. Much of it rang true and enabled a further scrutiny of our interpretations.

Then, finally, having gone through this entire intensive interpretive process, we spent time in reflection as a group, asking...

So what? What did we learn? What kind of data is this? What insights can we draw? And...of what use was all this?

And it led, not only to some deeper insights about the student experience of dissonance, but also to a critical engagement with the research process itself.



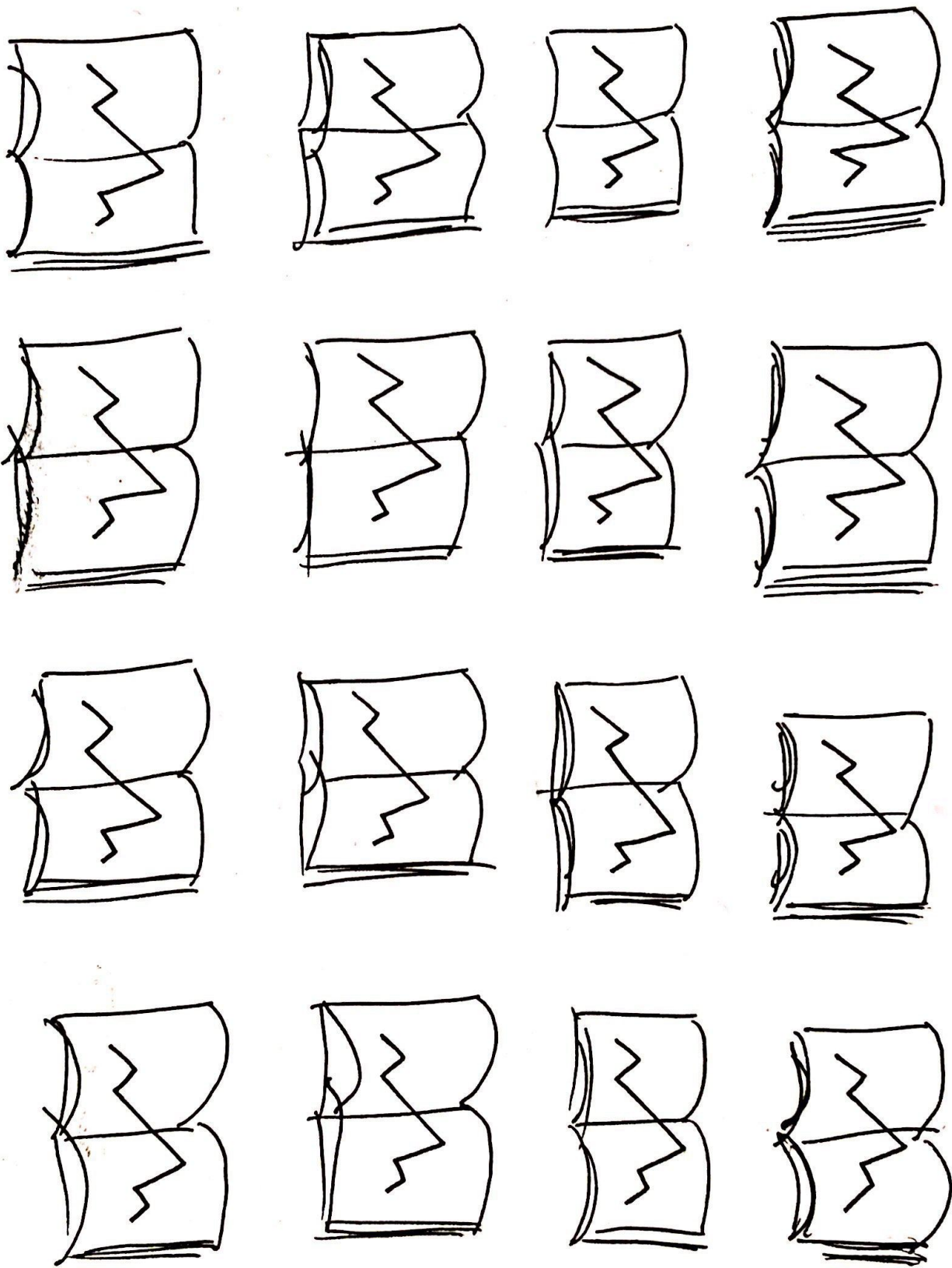
The Notion of Stuck Narratives

We started with our coded themes and realized that as we named these themes, we amplified them, and in the amplification, we noticed them more - a kind of feedback loop of reinforcement. This raised for us what became the prevailing insight of our work, namely the notion of “stuck narratives” and the ways in which a research process can perpetuate these. Petra Munro Hendry’s “The Future of Narrative” (2007) figured prominently in our thinking about the value of narrative research and, like her, we began to question the explanatory power of stories, we began to view critically our treatment of these student stories, and our need for some kind of order-making. Hendry (2007) writes:

Ultimately, I think it has to do with our need for the illusion of control and our inability to live with total uncertainty about what constitutes lived experience. As researchers we construct lives by reducing them to a series of events, categories, or themes and then put them back together again to make up a whole called narrative. Thus by constructing narratives we not only ultimately erase part of our lived experience but also impose a particular way of thinking about experience. (p. 491)

We came to understand that our research design, despite our efforts and conversation around it, was in the end a kind of insistence on order. We presupposed a kind of order or coherence to the student experience with this design. We created an experience of “storytelling” that squeezed student stories through the filters we created, establishing the perfect conditions for reproducing certain tropes and themes that the students themselves already brought to the table; the narratives they were already stuck on got even stickier through this process. Like Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s (2009) notion of the “single story” and its dangers, this idea of stuck narratives became a kind of lens through which we began to view, in a more complicated way, the storytelling “data”, and we became “less concerned with what stories are told, but why we tell a particular story at a particular time” (Hendry, 2007, p. 490). We began to wonder in what ways we and the students were simply choosing from and reproducing a narrow range of available cultural stories about students. Indeed, one central master narrative seemed to be operating in all but one of the student stories, the master narrative of the student experience:

student-moves-from-disorientation-to-belonging, student-overcomes-obstacles, student-forms-an-identity, student-is-transformed.



stuck narratives

The notable exception to this narrative are collages 3A & 3B, “Fragile Expectations” (3A) & “Welcome to Hell” (3B) whose stories make for a very interesting contrast. That story exemplifies an emerging counter-narrative, not about the student experience, but about (dis)organized post-secondary education:

Institutions-are-dysfunctional-and-inadequately-support-student-needs.

The student stories were honest but, collectively, and through the prism of our interpretative frames, reveal a kind of restrained authenticity, as if there was an inevitable convergence upon the “student-is-transformed-through-challenge” theme. We perceived that the experience of disorientation, the overcoming of deep challenge, **the becoming stronger through adversity *is the* normalized student experience.**

This is the oft-repeated grit narrative, the character-building narrative, the rite-of-passage, the pull-yourself-up-by-your-bootstraps narrative, all so deeply embedded in our collective consciousness about the post-secondary experience. And, naturally, this is a powerful, compelling, and genuine story, but it does raise the question about whether we are hiding from view the greater nuance, the stories of students’ life that lie outside that master narrative, a question thoughtfully raised more broadly by Zaretta Hammond (2014) in her work on culturally responsive teaching. She writes, “...for students, we give them only two choices when we promote a master narrative: Either resist it or accept it and let it become a self-fulfilling prophecy” (Hammond, 2014, para. 11).

This becomes all the more interesting when the “student-is-transformed-through-challenge” narrative co-exists with this other narrative about students as customers under-supported by the institutions they attend, exemplified in Collage Story 3A and 3B. This too is a powerful master narrative, though with shallower roots. These narratives compete for the soul of education asking fundamentally where the responsibility lies, but without making space for the messy middle-ground between them - the actual stories of student lives in all their nuance. And we are left with the burden of un-answered questions getting lost in the din of these dominant narratives: How do we find the balance between fostering university-ready students and student-ready universities? What challenges do we present to students that are really just harmful and un-necessary to their experience? In what ways do we ignore our responsibility as educators when we rationalise those harmful and unnecessary things as “part of the student experience”?

So... the most salient insight we gather from this research is about the research process itself and the ways in which we participate in the reproduction of the single story, the master narrative. Despite our concerted efforts to create an experience in which students would tell us their unique and idiosyncratic stories, and despite our best efforts to park and acknowledge our biases and to treat the students as co-participants in the research, we still felt implicated in a process that restrained or even incited what got told. This is not to call into question the truthfulness of the student stories - participants were deeply generous and thoughtful in their responses and engagement in this process - just that the research process itself that seeks to understand hidden realities of the student experience can be an exercise in simply perpetuating certain master narratives about that experience.

Conclusion and Suggestions

Our goal for doing this research was to tell a better, more nuanced story about the student experience that would help diminish the gap students feel between their expectations of student life and their actual lived experience of it. The work did indeed offer something in this regard, a confirmation that the gap exists, that students do feel that they are given a questionably incomplete picture of the realities of student life. And that, for some students, this is an incoherence that is difficult to resolve. The tantalizing insights about this warrant further study to better understand the nature of this gap and its consequences so that we can begin to explore initiatives to close it. This will be the focus of Phase 2 and 3 of SERT. But what is even more prominently revealed is the influence of the master “student-is-transformed-through-challenge” narrative on this problem. This narrative is, indeed, the primary but flawed mechanism through which that gap is resolved for students. Rather than give way to the counter universities-are-dysfunctional narrative, we embrace the student narrative that then absolves the institutions of responsibility for mitigating the unnecessary and harmful challenges that students face - as exemplified in Collage Story 3A and 3B. Challenges, necessary or not, are seen as simply a part of the student experience.

So, our impulse that the telling of more authentic student stories, in all their messy nuance and ambiguity, to prospective students ought to be part of our general “marketing” of the experience, still applies. By encountering something of the real but often hidden aspects of the student experience, a new student will encounter their own idiosyncratic experience as more congruent with their expectation, more “normal”. However, we need to be careful here in portraying the so-called real student experience as inevitably full of challenge and hardship because then we simply perpetuate the master student narrative. The conclusion here is a banal but important one - tell the truth, find ways to tell the truth, create spaces in which students can tell us the truth, look for the truth behind the veil of dominant narratives, work harder at listening; heed the advice of Petra Munro Hendry (2007) that “...to have faith in their stories might mean not analyzing, not verifying, not seeking trustworthiness, but “plugging into” the experience of listening” (p. 495).

Master narratives are a kind of composite, regarding students in the aggregate. This kind of “data” can be helpful for decision-makers, so of course we should continue to understand the lives of students and what is common to their experience.

But we also need to find ways to view students not as a collective, but as solitudes of experience.

**“If survival is an art, then mangroves
are artists of the beautiful: not only
that they exist at all—smooth barked,
glossy leaved, thickets of lapped
mystery—but that they can and do exist
as floating islands, as trees upright and
loose, alive and homeless on the
water.”**

~Annie Dillard

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Appendix A – Collage-Only Analysis Recording Sheet

Visual Analysis:

Dominant colour (dark, light, multi)

Arrangement (overlap or separate and sparse or cluttered)

Graphic dominance (word, image, both)

Hand-drawn/written elements (yes, no)

Overall visual impression

Thematic Analysis

Briefly describe your intuitive, immediate overall impressions of the piece, the motifs, meanings, themes, that emerge for you. This is a purely interpretive exercise. For example, one piece may seem to be a story about identity. Another one might be about place. Interpret the piece by thinking about these kinds of broad dimensions.

Appendix B – Participant Story Analysis Recording Sheet

Process
Does participant talk about their process (yes, no)
Attitude about process (apprehension, freedom, confusion, joy, inadequacy, other)
Clarity of participant narrative (a clear story, jumbled elements, ambiguous)
Insight (clear at the outset, emerges as participant speaks, unclear throughout)
Overall impression about participant reflection on process
Thematic Analysis
Briefly describe your intuitive, immediate overall impressions of the narrative, the motifs, meanings, themes, that emerge from the participant narrative. Comment on the demeanour of the participant. Are they fully engaged in the story? Are they bored? Do they appear to be having genuine insight? Are there any surprises? What is the primary theme(s) of the story? Where do they start? What kind of exchanges/connections between participants emerge? Do they influence each others' insights (e.g. do they give each other feedback or work with each other?)
Other Outcomes (friendship, confidence-building, etc.)
Are there other outcomes, not specifically related to their actual work, that emerge? Things like friendship or community building, confidence or interest in an art form?
Themes Identified in Story/Collage (Belonging, Place, Connection, Fear, Hopefulness, Learning, Struggle, Identity, Transformation, Resilience, User experience, Turning Points, Career, Ritual/Routine, Health, Confidence)

Appendix C - Sample of Thematic/Narrative Analysis and Thematic Clustering

Featuring two participant collage stories named randomly after New York streets as codes while analyzing.

	50th and 10th OCT 29 47:50	greenwich village OCT 29 1:27
Process		
Does participant talk about their process (yes, no)	"it's not really that polished"	no
Attitude about process (apprehension, freedom, confusion, joy, inadequacy, other)	ambivalent, kind of hard	ambivalent/none
Clarity of participant narrative (a clear story, jumbled elements, ambiguous)	jumbled elements	a clear story
Insight (clear at the outset, emerges as participant speaks, unclear throughout)	emerges as participant speaks	clear at the outset
Overall impression about participant reflection on process	hard to place self back in time before beginning; things didn't really apply anymore	adjusted the paper - cut the corners because it "looked empty"
Narrative/Thematic Analysis		
Briefly describe your intuitive, immediate overall impressions of the narrative, the motifs, meanings, themes, that emerge from the participant narrative. Comment on the demeanour of the participant. Are they fully engaged in the story? Are they bored? Do they appear to be having genuine insight? Are there any surprises? What is the primary theme(s) of the story? Where do they start? What kind of exchanges/connections between participants emerge? Do they influence each others' insights (e.g. do they give each other feedback or work with each other?)	Begins in the centre with "growth"; I wanted to come here - thinking about future; expected my confidence levels to go up; wanted to use my creative side; looking into the future; the city - PLACE as a theme; expected it to be more rigorous, if I had to work hard to get in then everyone else must have - expected competition - but not the case; others don't work as hard; growth as the centrepiece; ryerson doesn't really have a campus, it's just downtown; time on campus, nighttime (dark skyline image); grow as the central point	Begin with "lifestyle" - thinking about how much they've changed; learning how to connect with people and myself; aligning myself with who i want to be and where i see myself in the future; I'll always continue learning; not sure where i'm headed now; stepping into a whole different world; this time i'm just going to step through and find out; sounds more fluid, like they are open to ongoing transformation and learning; feeling comfortable in an uncomfortable environment; sound like they feel prepared to embark to new challenges; reflective; figuring out who they are; IDENTITY; identifies media as an influence of making you think certain things about the university experience (e.g. partying); understands that there's no universal student experience; reflective of how entering university with specific expectations can set yourself up for disaster versus now,

Appendix C cont'd

Other Outcomes (friendship, confidence-building, etc.)		
Are there other outcomes, not specifically related to their actual work, that emerge? Things like friendship or community building, confidence or interest in an art form?		
Themes Identified in Story/Collage (Belonging, Place, Connection, Fear, Hopefulness, Learning, Struggle, Identity, Transformation, Resilience, User experience, Turning Points, Career, Ritual/Routine, Health, Confidence)	Place, Learning	Identity, Transformation
Group Thematic Clustering	Learning, Transformation, Place, Learning, Belonging, Transformation, Identity	Identity, Transformation, Identity, Confidence, Hopefulness, Identity, Belonging, Identity, Connection, Belonging, Confidence,

Appendix D – Observer Recording Sheets

SERT Focus Group Retreat Observer Form

Name of facilitator:

Name of note taker:

Date:

Location:

Time:

Retreat Code [A, B, C, etc.]:

Total # participants:

General note-taking thoughts:

- Take notes in the language spoken during the discussion, avoid editorializing.
- Try to make your notes reflect as closely as possible the discussion that took place.
- Do not filter the discussion or elaborate on more than what has been said.
- Be alert to themes as we have identified them but also to whatever becomes prominent.
- Ensure that each participant is given a “code” according to the Retreat Code and the participant number. If the Retreat code is A, and there are five participants, participants will be identified as A1, A2, A3, A4, A5. Each participant will write their respective code on their collage. Ensure that your notes correspond to the relevant collage/participant.

Participant Code:

Themes identified in the story/collage	General observations
○ Belonging ○ Place ○ Connection ○ Fear ○ Hopefulness ○ Learning ○ Struggle ○ Identity ○ Transformation (transformation of self) ○ Resilience ○ User experience ○ Turning Points (significant event) ○ Career ○ Ritual ○ Health Others: _____ _____ _____	

We would like to warmly thank each of our participants for creating with us, sharing their stories, and allowing us to display their works with the broader Ryerson audience.

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This research study has been reviewed and approved by the Ryerson University Research Ethics Board [REB 2018-260].

