

CHAPTER 5

TRISTAN

“...traditional definitions of literacy are no longer adequate in a world where texts communicate to us in new ways.” – Sharon Goodman (1996)

*The Trees
are
Dancing
with
the Wind¹*

Tristan never ceases to amaze and teach me new things. He sees the world in amazing complexity and uses this complex perception and understanding to his advantage. He sees, uses and explores literacies constantly, prompting me to expand what I previously considered literacies. It was Tristan's use of the world around him to understand and create that forced me to start exploring the concept that all sign systems are more than supports for reading and writing but are in and of themselves literacies. His amazing ability to deal with complexity convinced me that we need to develop more complex theories of literacies, not just rely on the simplest.

Even when he sits down and read a book in the solitude of his room, which he often does, but when he does he is always making connections between the book and his lived experiences, other books, and other literacies. He uses multiple literacies simultaneously to make, understand and construct meaning. He uses the literacies of dramatic play, writing and building together in complex literate ways. This is part of Tristan's attraction to videogames; they use

¹ Poem by Tristan Age 9

multiple literacies in multimodal ways to engage the gamer in a literate experience and they reflect the way he prefers to engage with literacies.

Tristan's Literacies Uses

Tristan's story cannot really be teased apart from Emily's, though in an effort to make this story understandable to others I have created this arbitrary division. Emily and Tristan are certainly their own people; as mentioned earlier, Tristan learns and understands the world very differently from either Emily or myself. But Tristan's uses and understandings of literacies have been strongly influenced by Emily. She has been Tristan's primary playmate for his whole life. Tristan has an easy time making new friends and is immediately part of any new group he meets but he has always looked to Emily and values her company above all others even, I think, more than Christine and mine.

Tristan has often joined Emily in dramatic play since he was about one and half years old. Emily would include him as a part of her play, initially in a domineering manner but later with a more considerate and cooperative nature. They would often play together with cars, Barbies, building with blocks or Lego®, but, most interesting to me, they would also engage in complex dramatic plays (see figure 28). Emily would design the play, as discussed in the previous chapter, and Tristan would enact the role he was given. They would do this for hours at a time, though occasionally Tristan would adlib too much, upsetting Emily, or other times he would decide he wanted to do something else. On

these occasions rather than abandon the dramatic play Emily would incorporate the activity Tristan wanted to do, usually including play with cars or blocks, into the drama until he was interested in the drama again.



Figure 28: Tristan and Emily playing “Library” (age 7 & 4)

These were times that were rich with literacies woven throughout the play; blending and intertwining. During these times the stories they knew would be interwoven, creating new stories (see figure 29). Tristan and Emily would become the heroes of the stories and the stories would shift to reflect their local and lived experiences. As time went on this became a more negotiated process, occasionally needing support from either Christine or me, but initially Tristan was happy to go along with Emily’s ideas, thrilled to be playing with her.



Figure 29: “CinderEmily” & “Prince Tristan” (age 6 & 3)

After just over six months of playing like this we were given a TV (we had

previously made the choice not to have one). Just less than one month later, at 2 years of age, Tristan's interest in dramatic play completely disappeared and he stopped joining Emily in these elaborate dramas. It was Tristan's complete lack of interest in dramatic play that alarmed Christine and me the most, more than the change in Emily's dramatic play, which prompted us to return the TV.

Tristan resumed his interest in dramatic play after we moved to Indiana, when he was two and a half years old. Two things seemed to trigger this

happening: the removal of the TV and

the birth of his brother Simon. For

Tristan the birth of Simon was a

traumatic experience; he was excited

about the idea of having a brother to

play with but was very disappointed

when Simon wasn't capable of doing

much more than lying on his back and

demanding Christine's and my time.

Life was not fair. He recovered quickly

and shifted his attention to Emily, who

was away at school for half the day

during the week. He was not used to

playing alone and was intently interested in interaction from family members.

Emily was not very interested in building and playing cars, though she was willing



Figure 30: Tristan & Emily playing at dance (age 3 & 6)

to do these activities; her favourite activities were drama and dance (see figure 30). So, Tristan was drawn back into the world of dramatic play.

Until Tristan started to see himself as a reader at the age of eight the different forms of dramatic play were Tristan's favourite form of literacy to construct meaning. He would create rich and complex imaginary worlds with Emily (and Simon, when he was older). These complex dramas would carry on for days and sometimes even weeks. They would take on three main forms: live action dramas, Playmobil® setups, and puppet shows. These dramas were times for experimenting and through them Tristan worked hard to figure out his place in the world. By their nature these dramas were rich multiliteracies events. The children would spend the majority of their time setting up the drama; this setup could take days, creating the world either they or the Playmobil people would interact with. This setup involved detailed negotiations as the children constructed the shape the drama would take and shared resources. There was always a jockeying for favourite roles and materials.

Writing was a vital part of these dramas and it was through these dramatic plays that Tristan did most of his experimenting with writing. Since the writing done during these plays was part of his imaginary world, Tristan did not seem to feel the same need to comply to conventions that he did when writing outside of the context of a dramatic play. Some of the writing he did was part of the setup and was used to put limits on who had access to the



Figure 31: No trespassing sign (age 6)

Tristan as a Writer

It was when Tristan was two years old and we had the television, that I first recognized him as writer and started saving his work for analysis. This writing, like Emily's, was in the form of scribbles (see figure 34). As with Emily's writing, I am certain that Tristan was writing before this time, but this is when Tristan started to describe his work as writing and made the distinction between it and

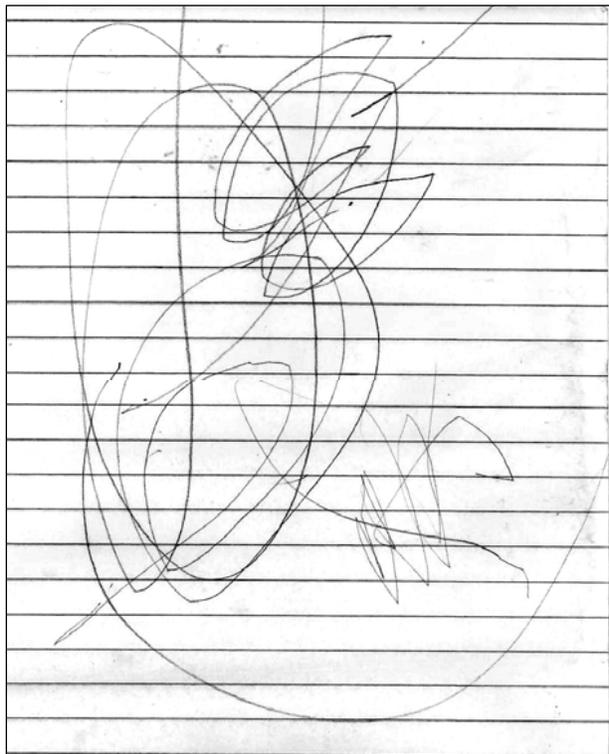


Figure 34: Tristan's scribble writing/drawing. (age 3)

his art (see figure 35). It is difficult to say whether Tristan's writing was modeled on Emily's scribble writing or if, like Emily, he was trying to express a common feature they both saw in writing, possibly the swirling flow of the cursive writing Christine and I frequently used when we wrote.

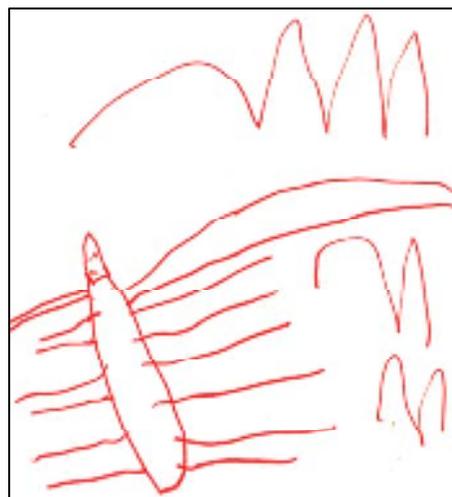


Figure 35: A later example of Tristan distinguishing between writing & drawing. (age 4)

Tristan, like Emily, continued to use scribble writing after he was capable of using

letters and was experimenting with personal spelling. But with Tristan, during this

period, the letters consistently appear at the top of the page and then the rest is finished in scribble writing (see figure 36).

For Tristan there has been a very deliberate and steady progression toward conventional writing. You will notice that the orientation of the scribbles in figure 36 was unimportant; in this sample they are vertical as opposed to the horizontal one

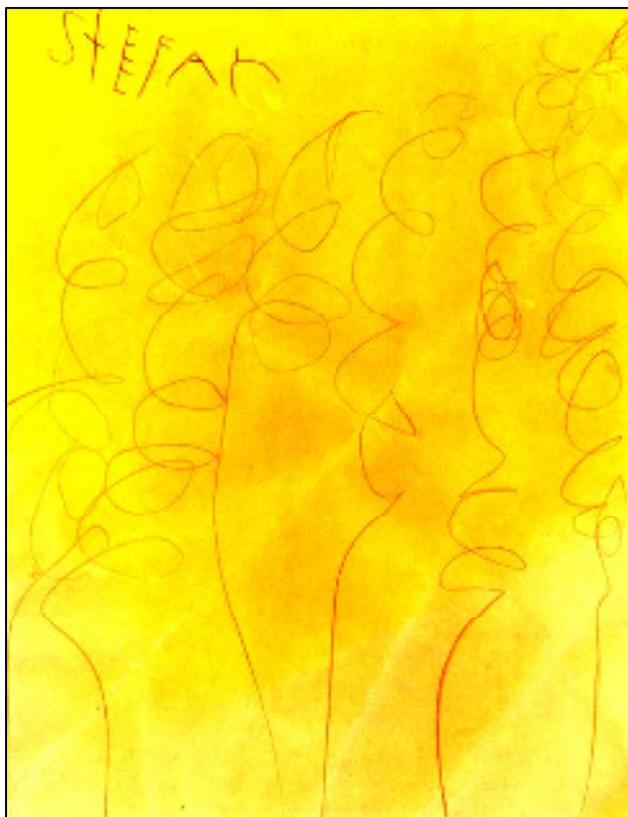


Figure 36: Tristan's later scribble writing (age 4)

would expect. At this point in Tristan's understanding of writing (age 4) he continued to use scribbles but they were clearly a placeholder for his thoughts but he did not consider them "real writing" and described them as "just scribbles". Shortly after this time Tristan stopped using scribbles and only wrote with letters in what he believed to be "real writing" (see figure 37).

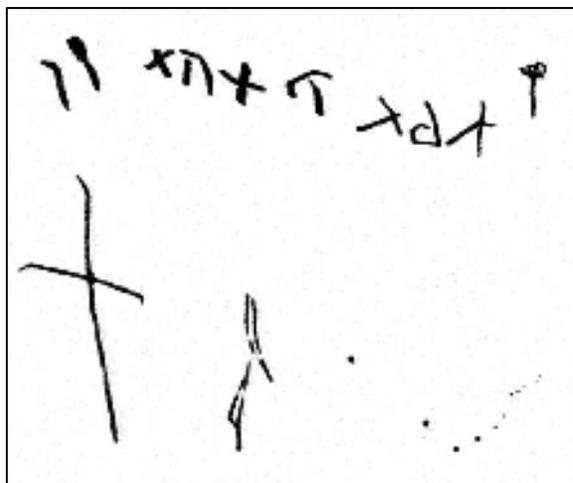


Figure 37: Letter to Tristan's Bible study teachers (age 4)

To my Teachers from / Tristan

This was a very frustrating time for Tristan and me. Tristan became

increasingly focused on accuracy and was very aware of what he called “the right way to write.” I, believing in the importance of process writing, insisted that Tristan first write a draft before I would help with conventional spelling. This approach was very problematic; because unlike my school setting, where often my students were more likely to have received the message that conventions were important from home and, tacitly, that personal meaning was unimportant, Tristan had always been given the message that meaning above all else is what is important in writing. He knew this message and was rejecting it, in favour of what he saw in books, Emily’s writing, and adult writing: conventions.

At this time I had also inadvertently started reading Emily’s work without my usual, “wow, great writing, tell me about it.”, which I still used when Tristan presented me with his work. Tristan, being astute, realized that I was saying this because I could not read his writing with any accuracy. I realized this too late, and even though I returned to my “tell me about it” stance anytime Emily presented me with her work, Tristan had decided convention and audience readability were the key elements in writing (see figure 38).

Christine’s approach during this phase of Tristan’s writing, which lasted for the duration of this study period, was to support his requests for conventional

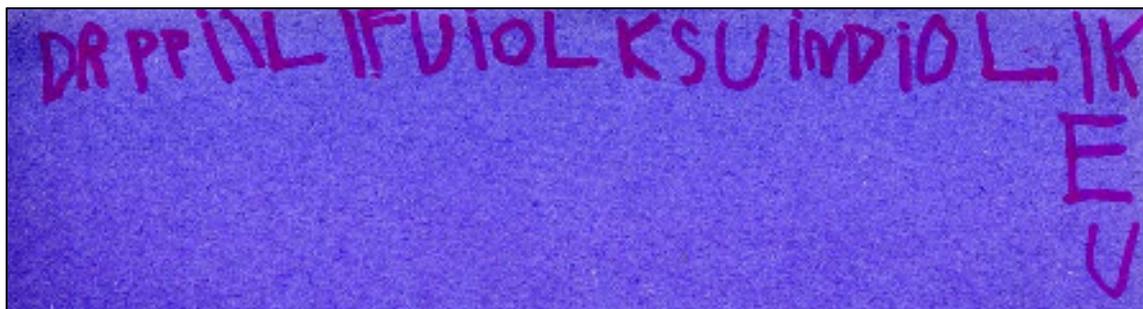


Figure 38: A note to me from Tristan (age 6)

Dear papa I love you I will kiss you and I will hug / you

spelling. If Tristan asked for the spelling of a word she gave it to him. Her reasoning was that “it is better for him to write than not write”, which was his choice anytime I demanded a draft; he chose to not write at all. The writing process was not worth the frustration it caused; on several occasions Tristan’s writing sessions with me would end in tears and with Tristan feeling a failure at writing, because he was not able to “write anything right.” Tristan came to me less and less for assistance with his writing, and I now believe that, since my process writing approach was causing frustration for Tristan, it was not beneficial. With Christine’s assistance Tristan continued to write, and she was able to successfully reintroduce the concept of drafting and other elements of process writing. However, Tristan didn’t see himself as a writer, a pattern which was repeated in his reading.

Tristan as a Reader

Tristan’s approach to reading followed a similar pattern to his writing. Initially he was willing to experiment and attempt to read the texts that surround us in our lives, creating meanings for himself. He was confident in these meanings and didn’t seem to care that when I read a story to him the exact words were not the same. It is possible that Tristan believed, like he did with his early writing, that personal meaning was what was important and that the details were unimportant or certainly less important. He read his own writing with ease and confidence but he also read street signs and other environmental print. He was particularly interested in signs with numbers and would call out the speed

limit as we drove past, often looking at the speedometer in the car and commenting on how accurately I was driving the car, especially if I was going too fast; he seemed to assume that if I was driving faster than the speed limit it was because I was not aware of the discrepancy between the posted limit and the actual speed displayed on the speedometer.

His memory too was remarkable. He would use the signs and other visual cues he read as we were driving to remember the route to various regular activities like the library, but he also remembered the route to less frequently traveled destinations, like how to get to my parent's house in Michigan from where we lived in Indiana. It was this uncanny ability and the way that Tristan and Emily both seemed to be able to accurately read books that had been read to them that led me to the conclusion that they were reading. They both seemed to access the print in a manner that was different than the way we as adults access meaning, in the same way they were writing in a personally meaningful way, to access meaning and create meaning. Clearly, Tristan was reading the text and accessing meaning from signs and picture books in a way that was meaningful but different from the way an adult would. He was also clearly combining literacies to make meaning. When he was reading books he used the pictures and the markings (words) to remember and tell the story in the book; when we were driving he would use the signs, travel time, items of interest to him and landmarks to make meaning.

Though Tristan was able to read familiar books that we read repeatedly to him, he preferred new books. Tristan seemed to be drawn to the new and

resisted the idea of rereading stories. I suspect that this might have been a contributing factor in Tristan reading later than Emily. Tristan seemed to be attracted to the information contained in books, and was drawn to non-fiction, funny stories, and stories with action. It is possible that he didn't want to hear a story more than once because he felt he already knew the information it contained. Even with books he labeled as really good, like *Does a kangaroo have a mother, too?* (Carle, 2000), the *Bill and Pete* books by Tomie dePaola (1998; 1987; 1978) and the *Zoom* books by Tim Wynne-Jones (1992; 1985; 1983) he did not want to have them read over and over again as Emily had. He wanted to hear these stories again only after many months had passed. Additionally, Tristan preferred other literacies for creating and expressing meaning, giving him less practice with reading and writing. This concerned me, as a literacy researcher, because I understood that children need to hear stories frequently and repeatedly to be able to scaffold their learning to learn to read the words on the page. What I didn't realize until much later was that Tristan was using other literacies to making meaning and 'scaffold' his learning when he was reading.

Much like his writing Tristan went into a silent phase in his reading. At the age of six he suddenly decided his approximations and meaning focused reading were not enough. He started to focus on accuracy. This greatly reduced the amount of time that Tristan spent reading independently. He continued to enjoy being read to, and would not go to bed at night until after he was read to, whether it was after his bedtime or not. Tristan continued to have some independent reading time most days as he had the option of staying up for an extra half hour if

he used it to read in bed. He continued to be attracted to books that were new to him. During this time he flatly stated on numerous occasions that he could not read; other times he would say “I have read that book but I don’t know what it says.”

Regardless of how much Christine and I pointed out to Tristan that he was a reader, capable of reading signs and simple pattern books, exposing these capabilities to him regularly, he rejected this idea. He saw Emily, Christine and me reading and writing for pleasure, for school, and for others, and saw himself as an unaccomplished outsider. And there was nothing we could do to help him feel like he was a member of the literacy club (Smith, 1988). It was not until he used his interest in videogaming to access reading that Tristan was able to see himself as a reader (this story is discussed in chapter 7).

Videogaming as a Literate Experience

Seeing how Tristan used his interest in videogaming to join the literacy club inspired me to start to analyze some of his videogaming to really understand how he used it. I had long thought that the imbedded text in videogames would support my children’s interest in reading and writing. Because of this I saw videogames as a valuable support, but not a literacy. Through analysing Tristan’s videogame use I have come to understand that videogames are quite possibly one of the most multimodal literacies there is. The gamer uses reading, math, art, music, and movement to make sense of a world which bombards him/her with visual, auditory, and interactive experiences. Videogaming is potentially a rich

literate experience and it is Tristan's use of videogaming as literacy that changed my mind; convincing me that it is indeed a literacy.

Using Tristan's favourite game², *Ape Escape* (SCEA, 1999), I began to consider and explore the possibility of videogaming as a literacy. It was through Tristan's playing of this game that he demonstrated to me that videogaming is a literate activity. The basic premise of the game is that an evil intelligent monkey has empowered other monkeys in an attempt to take over the world; the gamer assumes the role of Spike who is tasked to capture all the bad monkeys and return them to the zoo. Like most videogames *Ape Escape* advances through progressively complex tasks as the game unfolds. As each new element of the game is introduced there is an oral introduction of it, highlighting the salient points the gamer needs to pay attention to.

In this screen shot (see figure 39) we can see the use of text, numeric notation (for the lap time); times to beat; the times of other players; and a map that indicates where the player is in relation to the course and to other players. Tristan took into account of all this information and used it to his advantage to become proficient in the game. Tristan discovered



Figure 39: A screen shot of a mini-game within *Ape Escape*

² That is during 2003.

quite early in his gaming experiences that he did better at the game when he used all of the information presented to him in the game, as opposed to skipping past this information to just advance through the game play. This practice also increased Tristan's enjoyment of the overall game experience, as he gets a great deal of pleasure out of being successful. Other screen shots show the use of written information for the gamer to use. As a part of Ape Escape the gamer has to try to capture escaped monkeys (see figure 40). Each of these monkeys has different attributes: speed, attack and alertness. Also on the screen is the monkey's name, e.g. "Ton Ton," and its level, e.g. "monkey level 2," (on a scale between one and five). Tristan would take in and use all this information very quickly and deduce that this monkey would be easy to capture and devise a plan to capture it using this information. Additionally, the game uses sounds to give an indication of where the monkey is, whether the monkey has detected the gamer's presence, and give an indication of the monkey's response before it is seen. The game also uses a musical sound track that reflects the appropriate emotional state the main character would be in during different parts of the game.

I started to think about videogaming as literacy and tried to understand the cueing systems that Tristan used to make meaning from



Figure 40: A screen shot from Ape Escape

the game as he played. Looking at semantics, or meaning; the semantic purpose of any game is the principle reason why anyone finds a game interesting or boring; to save the world through skill, cunning, and valour is far more attractive to children, and adults, than the rote learning of skills. The meaningful purpose of any game defines its success or failure. Regardless, meaningful engagement on one level or another is what seems to drive videogames and game play. Syntax is the rules that govern the game and game play. Tristan's ability to determine what these rules are and exploit them is one thing that makes him an exceptional gamer. The sensory cueing system in videogaming is one of the most complex and rich of any literacy; it is multimodal and multisensory. The gamer is bombarded with visual, auditory, and interactive experiences to navigate through and understand any game. And finally, each game progresses through a series of levels as the gamer moves from one level to another, gaining skill and pragmatic knowledge of the game which often builds on the gamer's experiences with other games. Videogames are a rich semiotic experience full of multiple signs to help the gamer understand the meaning of the game and the intent of the game's author. Videogame developers are communicating with the gamer in the same way that an author communicates with a reader; through a transactive process. Videogaming is a less valued literacy than reading or writing, but it is a literacy nonetheless. The success of videogames is in their ability to use multiple literacies in a multimodal way to create meaning. The gamer uses reading, maths, art, music, symbols, and movement to make sense of and succeed at the game. Each of the multiple literacies that are used work

together to help the gamer play the game and understand the intended meaning of the author of the videogame. This is the power of videogames. They intentionally use multiple literacies to scaffold understanding and learning for the gamer; creating a rich world in which the intent of the game's author can be clearly understood, often on multiple levels.

Tristan's literate videogaming practice.

The key to Tristan's use of videogames as a literate experience are the practices he engaged in. Videogaming is clearly a language that the game's authors use to communicate with the gamer but it is the way that Tristan used videogaming that made it a literacy for him. Tristan used the full range of literacies together to make meaning of a game and to be successful at his game play. Unlike some gamers who play to just get through the game he tried to maximize his gaming experience, and not only to get past different levels or quests but to be the best and maximize his game score at the same time. To do this Tristan engaged in a number of literate practices while gaming, and beyond playing the game.

When Tristan was gaming he took in all of the information he was bombarded with during game play. He paid attention to details easily missed by the casual user such as the direction of noises and exploring an entire level, discovering many 'secrets' and 'bonuses' as opposed to just linearly working through a level. He often moved backward in a game and re-explored levels when he developed greater skill at the game or his character had acquired new abilities so as to explore the game further in that level. While playing he was

constantly multitasking, paying attention to all the prompts available to him at that time during his game play.

Tristan's use of these multimodal inputs was so complex it was difficult for me to track, even when I was intentionally documenting his game play. It is easy for us, as adults, to discount this complex use of videogaming as literacy because there is so much going on at any moment during the game play that we are not capable of following all that is happening . We simply say that it is impossible for the gamer to be processing all of the information and literacies presented to them in the fast paced instance of game play. But Tristan clearly did take advantage of all the multimodal messages presented throughout game play to take full advantage of and master the game. This became evidently clear to me while I was engaged in learning to play this game myself; Tristan was constantly pointing out various multimodal cues and multiliteracies I needed to take into account to improve my game play. It is the act of videogaming that makes videogames a literacy, not videogames themselves; videogames are a tool or a language. It is the activity and the way the gamer engages with a videogame that makes it a literacy.

Practices in our home that supported Tristan's use of videogaming as a literate experience.

We valued Tristan as a reader, even though he did not see himself as one. We pointed out to him the times he was reading, whether it was making predictions while reading a picture book (or reading a picture book) or reading a street sign. We constantly referred to Tristan as a reader, because Christine and

I saw him as a reader, and we encouraged him. Even though he was eight before he saw himself as a member of the literacy club he received no remediation and at no time did we pressure him to read. We trusted he would see himself as a reader when he was ready.

We also had specific family practices around the use and playing of videogames. First of all, Christine and I valued Tristan's interest in videogaming. I played, and continue to play, videogames with all of our children regularly. Christine and I purchased cooperative and multi-player games for the children but they purchased single player games with their own money. Anytime videogames were purchased, by the children or Christine and me, we researched the game on the internet for both content and playability and made the decision to buy the game as a family. This research was done collaboratively with the children and was usually web based. It is also important to mention that we generally limit videogaming to 1 hr a day and we have a video monitor for this purpose (and watching the occasional movie), but we do not have a television.

Conclusions

Much like Emily, and as has been demonstrated through the way Tristan approached reading, Tristan uses and understands literacies as multiple, both in the way he uses literacies together and what he considers a literacy. Tristan has seriously stretched my thinking in what I even consider a possible literacy. Tristan used literacies to create meaning and understand the world. His use of literacies was always multiple and complex. He saw math, art, games, reading,

writing, drama, and science everywhere and in everything. It was the way he approached everything; it was the way he saw and still sees the world. Tristan's use, learning and understandings of literacies seemed to be in constant flux, as were the preferred literacies he chose to use at any given time, much like the way dramatic play lost favour and then returned to become central.

This complexity had further complications as well; I suspect that it was the multiple nature of Tristan's understanding of literacies that resulted in the apparent delay of some of Tristan's traditional literacy learning, like his reading or writing. It seems possible that in the same way that learning more than one language often causes a delay in acquisition of L1 and L2 but can result in advanced language learning in the end (Cummins, 2000) Tristan's apparent delay was the result of learning more than one literacy at a time, and this will ultimately leave him with a deeper understanding of these literacies.

Tristan taught me that this complexity of understanding and uses of literacies needs an equally complex approach to the way in which we support children's literacies learning. My insistence on process writing was a hindrance instead of a help to Tristan. What I considered literacies was also limited, and constrained the ways I could support him. He showed me that we need to support and value all semiotic systems children are using to making meaning. For children, and specifically Tristan, these sign systems are literacies. These literacies are not used in isolation but support each other in much the same way that Tristan used reading, music and videogames; or reading, writing and dramatic play to make meaning. The use of multiple literacies in this way

enhanced Tristan's experience and the meaning making capabilities of all the literacies he used.



Figure 41: Tristan's flowers, revealing amazing colour sense, movement, and perspective. (age 6)