



***THE SKINNY ON THIS IS MY BODY:  
FILMMAKING AS EMPOWERMENT INTERVENTION AND ACTIVISM***

LEANNE LEVY

**Abstract**

Over the course of one academic year (2005/2006), I worked in a Montreal, Canadian all-girls' high school as a critical media literacy and video production teacher wearing a researcher's hat and invited my 16-year old students to explore personal experiences as starting points for making meaningful, critical, and transformative media. The film called *This Is My Body* [[click on title to view video](#)]—distributed by the *National Film Board of Canada* and accompanied by a *Teacher's Guide*—is a video collage of my students' film work who through research and documentary video production explore issues related to media influence, peer pressure, body image, eating disorders, self-injury, boyfriends, sexuality, and parenting. In this paper, I introduce the arts-based empowerment intervention methodology that facilitated the girls to become researchers and filmmakers of their lives, and I share one student's pedagogical journey to shed light on how the girls used filmmaking to actualize inner wellbeing and inspire social action.

The topics addressed in our media class really made me think about the different ways that I can use media to channel my emotions. Pictures speak a thousand words and in and of themselves they are a form of therapy. I can really relate with the fact that many of us cannot afford the financial cost of therapy to help deal with our issues. If this new psychological method was introduced in schools and youth centers then teens and young adults could express their anger into something productive and beneficial. (Kim, personal communication, March 28, 2006)

Media is an extremely effective tool for both political purposes and self-actualization. In our culture today, the media probably has the most influence over youth. It is very important that people use the media to get their voices heard. It's a form of self-expression that should be made readily available to all. Everyone has something to say and even if it is something small it's important to get your message out there because individuals can change the world and the way that people think. (Erin, personal communication, May 22, 2006)

Although Oprah would sensitize me on certain subjects I never acted on anything because I didn't always relate. But after what we experienced this year, I have the sense that I need to respect myself, that others go through the same difficult phases, that especially women are vulnerable in this society, and that media can be used as an intelligent source of help. (Sabrina, personal communication, June 1, 2006)

Although more than ever girls are highly achieving, they still lack adequate resources within school and community settings to nurture emotional development and inner wellbeing. Adolescence is the time when negotiating healthy choices are essential to becoming an autonomous adult, 'Who am I?' and 'What do I value?' are critical questions at the forefront of teenage girls' minds. Layered like a collage, everything a girl values is relevant in how she sees herself, her world, and her role within society, and with the many pressures girls face to shape and define

their feminine selves, girls need a non-stigmatized safe space where they can freely discuss meaningful issues, share individual perspectives, and negotiate sense of selves amidst the tensions and contradictions inherent in society's construction of girlhood (Levy, 2006). (See Figure 1.)



Figure 1. Classroom Focus Group Interview

Safe spaces break isolation, support the creation of community, and offer opportunities for the nourishment of girls' agency by means of connection and engagement (Surrey, 1991). Girls want to frame their lives, share experiences and generate knowledge grounded in their daily realities to improve the conditions of their lives (Hussein, Berman, Poletti, Loughheed-Smith, Ladha, Ward, & MacQuarrie, 2006; Levy, 2007a), and adults in female learning environments are accountable for providing girls with opportunities to engage with, understand, and transform what is [potentially] harmful. (See Figure 2.)



Figure 2. Video still by Chrissy and Tessy

Arts are among the most important vehicles for enabling young people to discuss their situations and express their feelings (Robinson, 2001) and all-female learning environments are ideal for arts-based developmental group work to emphasize democracy, learning how to learn, self-knowledge, and social awareness (Cruddas & Haddock, 2003). (See Figure 3.)



Figure 3. Still from *Listen!* A Girls' Public Service Announcement

Nineteenth century feminist Margaret Fuller (1845) said, "women are the best helpers of one another. Let them think; let them act; till they know what they need" (p. 94) (Figure 4). Following in her footsteps and keeping this legacy alive, my students and I became each other's "protective umbrella[s]" (Brumberg, 1997, p. 16) as we collectively explored our meaning making practices, sense of selves, ways to resolve conflict, and our power for change. In becoming researchers and filmmakers of our own and each other's lives, we were able to re-consider our tensions and develop the skills to re-frame them with intention. The making of the political self begins with developing a critical consciousness towards oneself. Italian revolutionary and political theorist Antonio Gramsci ([1935]1971) said,

To transform the external world ... is to potentiate oneself and develop oneself... For this reason one can say that [wo]man is essentially "political" since it is through the activity of transforming and consciously directing other [wo]men that [wo]man realized [her] "humanity" and "human nature." (p. 360) (See Figure 4.)



Figure 4. A class with the girls

Over the course of one academic year (2005/2006) while completing my doctoral studies, I worked in a Montreal, Canadian all-girls' high school as a critical media literacy and video production teacher wearing a researcher's hat and invited my 16-year old students to explore personal experiences as starting points for making meaningful, critical, and transformative media. My media course designated as optional was conducted with 30 girls, approximately 15 per class. Together we worked as co-teachers, co-researchers, and co-agents of change using media instead of it using us. Through mutual guidance, the girls each performed research about a topic that was meaningful to her, and transformed it into a pedagogical film. All individual films were screened to both groups of girls and used for classroom learning. (See Figure 5.)



Figure 5. Still of Nadia in *Celebrity* by Justine

Having received consent from the girls and their parents to re-use and re-edit their films for future educational opportunities, in the summer

that followed, I reviewed their work with the intent to situate the girls' voices within a broader social and political context. When analyzing an array of issues brought to the table through their research-based films, two broad themes emerged for many students including *peer and media's affect on shaping femaleness* and *a girl's relationship with her body*.

*This Is My Body: A Film By High School Girls* (2007b) is edited based on video clips taken from 14 individual films produced and directed by sixteen 16-year old filmmakers. It is a 36-minute video collage of 20 girls' voices, between the ages of 9 and 18 years who look into the mirror to ask, "What does it mean to be me?" Through research and documentary video production, the girls turned the camera on themselves and each other to share secrets and personal perspectives around the issues of media influence, peer pressure, body image, eating disorders, boyfriends and sexuality, self-injury, parenting, self-awareness, conflict resolution, and social action. The research methods the girls used for gathering their data include video documented focus group and one-on-one interviews, photo-voice, performance art, illustration, animation, and ambient video production. Once I completed editing this collaged film I submitted it to the *National Film Board of Canada* and it was acquired along with a *Teacher's Guide* that I wrote for international distribution. (click on Figure 6.)

Figure 6. Video clip *This Is My Body* film trailer [\[click on title to view video\]](#)

Although this was my first time teaching documentary filmmaking to teenage girls in a high school classroom setting, it was not my first experience dabbling in therapeutic work and activism with students. For nearly twenty years of teaching art within multicultural urban and suburban community and academic settings with preschoolers, adolescents, adults, and senior citizens, connecting meaningful art production with lived experience, social awareness, and inner wellbeing have always been central to my praxis. But to design and implement this particular media curriculum that caters to girls' emotional development and wellbeing needs, and edit their individual films into one feature length film, required specific skills that were developed and honed over many years, careers, and tears. Informed and inspired by previous research with and

about girls,<sup>1</sup> all-female teaching experiences,<sup>2</sup> a professional background in media production and business,<sup>3</sup> and my personal history ‘growing up girl’,<sup>4</sup> I designed an intergenerational arts-based empowerment intervention methodology and positioned inner wellbeing central to initiating self-actualization and social action. To quote Dawn Currie and Deirdre Kelly (2006), “the goal of feminist empowerment is the cultivation of what we call transformative agency, an empowerment that engages girls in projects that work to change the material context of their existence. Such a strategy of intervention ... can help redefine the limits of girlhood” (p. 168). (See Figure 7.)



Figure 7. Student-Teacher Relationship

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1 For my doctoral dissertation entitled *Pink Politics: A Research Project About Girls* ([2004] 2006), I invited seven White, multi-cultured, middle class teenage girls between the ages of 12 and 14 years to become researchers of their own lives and co-researchers of the conditions of girlhood. Through photo and video-ethnography, and video documented focus group and photo-elicitation interviews, the girls offer a glimpse into their private lives as they reflect upon their relationships with popular culture. For further information on this research project, please visit: [http://web.mac.com/pinkpolitics/pinkpolitics/Pink\\_Politics.html](http://web.mac.com/pinkpolitics/pinkpolitics/Pink_Politics.html).

2 *Popular Culture as a Mirror to the Self: Teacher-Training Through Art and Popular Visual Culture* is a classroom curriculum centered on personal and teacher identity. Please read more about this classroom curriculum in Chapter 18 (Levy, 2006) of Paul Duncum’s (Ed.), *Visual Culture in the Art Class: Case Studies*. VA: NAEA. To download this article, please visit: [http://web.mac.com/pinkpolitics/pinkpolitics/Teacher\\_Education/Teacher\\_Education.html](http://web.mac.com/pinkpolitics/pinkpolitics/Teacher_Education/Teacher_Education.html)

3 From 1997 until 2004 I was the founder and creative director of *Fuzion Creative Agency* a multimedia production company that specialized in re-grouping youthful graffiti and other visual artists for corporate re-branding and activism in the community. To learn more about Fuzion, please visit: [http://web.mac.com/pinkpolitics/pinkpolitics/Leanne\\_Levy\\_Ph.D..html](http://web.mac.com/pinkpolitics/pinkpolitics/Leanne_Levy_Ph.D..html)

4 ‘Growing up girl’ throughout my teenage years often meant using my body as a canvass to illustrate my pain. From the age of 12 until 18 years, I journeyed through bulimia, self-injury, and several ‘cry-for-help’ suicide attempts. By twenty-one years of age, art found me, and I found purpose.

In this paper, I share the pedagogical process that invited the girls to become researchers and filmmakers of their own lives, and I demonstrate how filmmaking was used individually and collectively as a creative, educational, and empowering political tool to nurture meaningful self-awareness, critical conflict resolution, and transformative social action. The intent is organized by two sections: The Methodology and The Journey. In section One, I share the theoretical framework of the methodology and I introduce a ‘Fourth-Wave’ pedagogical model. In section Two, through one student’s journey supported by her classmates and myself, I share the pedagogical process that facilitated the creation of her research and film, and I present video clips to demonstrate how filmmaking was used to nurture transformative action.

### **Part One: The Methodology The Theoretical Framework**

The affluent, educated, liberated women of the First World, who can enjoy freedoms unavailable to any women ever before, do not feel as free as they want to. And they can no longer restrict to the subconscious their sense that this lack of freedom has something to do with apparently frivolous issues, things that really should not matter. Many are ashamed to admit that such trivial concerns to do with physical appearance, bodies, faces, hair, clothes matter

so much. But in spite of shame, guilt, and denial, more and more women are wondering if it isn't that they are entirely neurotic and alone but rather that something important is indeed at stake that has to do with the relationship between female liberalization and female beauty ... women have more money and power and scope and legal recognition than we have ever had before; but in terms of how we feel about ourselves physically, we may actually be worse off than our unliberated grandmothers. (Wolf, 2002, pp. 9-10)

Socialized largely by the media, family, boys, the school environment, and each other, "girls come to understand that there is a certain degree of power and pleasure to be drawn from rendering the public self desirable. Though these might not be the forms of empowerment that we most want to bestow on young girls, they remain one of the few options where girls can gain a sense of power and control" (Wertheimer, 2006, p. 222). In contemporary Western society where female beauty is valued as a top commodity, young girls have acquired their citizenship status and newfound power at the cost of a patriarchal capitalist economy that relies heavily on the exploitation of their bodies. Sophie Wertheimer (2006) explains,

... North America[n] girls are brought up in a society where looks matter. Ours is a culture that has made beauty, a cult, complete with accompanying myths, rituals, and iconography. The beautiful woman is prized and revered, adorning every magazine cover, every fairytale fantasy. She is also objectified, commodified, and sexualized in the process. (pp. 220-221) (See Figure 8.)



Figure 8. Media literacy workshop and focus group conducted by Lisa

To situate this methodology within a fourth wave feminist framework one that is guided by political activism and sustained by spirituality (Peay, 2005), and to understand how it emerged, I present a brief overview of the third wave feminist discourse, that of *girlpower*, i.e., personal choice (Levy, 2006).

Since the early 1990s, young womanhood has become central to the debates of Western society concerning girls as the symbol for cultural and economic change and central to these debates is the discourse of *girlpower* (Harris, 1999b; 2001; 2004a; 2004b; Griffin, 2004; Friezche, 2004; Baumgardner & Richards, 2004; Driscoll, 1999; 2002; Hopkins, 1999). This new discourse of personal choice was first initiated by the social, political, and cultural ideology of the underground *Grrrlpower* movement, that of *Riot Grrrl*. Founded in 1991, *Grrrlpower's Riot Grrrl* (grrr communicating anger), and its association with alternative music scenes, began as an underground [Third Wave] feminist movement advocating for the improvement of girls' lives (Harris, 1999b; 2001). Borrowing from punk culture's DIY (do-it-yourself) philosophy, *Riot Grrrls'* discourse of personal choice emphasizes a focus on the self, the power of the individual as a political agent, and her responsibility to social change. Music, zines, posters, poetry and the body are used as communication tools to resist traditionally narrow ways of viewing feminine identities. Influenced by the *Riot Grrrl* ideology and standing on a similar platform, that of the liberalization of personal choice, the *Spice Girls* were the first mainstream all-female band to bring this new and powerful image of girls who dressed how they wanted, and said what they wanted to a

mainstream audience. The five outspoken girls marketed “an all female world of fun, sassiness, and dressing up to please the self” (Griffin, 2004, p. 33), and endorsed a playfulness within female friendships as holding greater value over intimate relationships with boys (Harris, 2004a; Frieztche, 2004).

The girlpower ideology, from its cultural inception to its consumer application, characterizes girls as “independent, successful and self-inventing” (Harris, 2004a, p. 14), and connotes a girl’s power to control her own identity by inventing and reinventing her feminine self/selves (Hopkins, 1999). It encourages a girl to take back her individual rights as a desiring sexual female and to celebrate femininity as an individual choice, the way she defines it for herself. In short, both girlpower and girlpower initiatives support women and girls as reclaiming and having agency over their subjective and objective selves.

But despite its association with girls developing individualized expressions of strength through athleticism, consumer citizenship, career ambition, physical appearance, and sexuality — girlpower is also critiqued as a discourse that racializes (Griffin, 2004) and excludes girls’ political selves (Taft, 2004). Girlpower has been attacked for “having nothing to do with changing power relationships” (p. 71), for “dismissing the need for feminist action” (p. 72), for “having achieved gender equality, without ever noting the way that this is tied to racial, sexual and class politics” (p. 72), and for “presenting a world with no need for social change” (p. 73), thus discouraging girls from engaging in challenges, which seek to find solutions to these inequalities.

Also heavily marketed in today’s consumer society is the flip side of the girlpower discourse, that of girls-at-risk, which positions girls of all cultural, economic and class-based backgrounds as at-risk for delinquent, nihilist, and antisocial behavior. At-risk girls are said to “lack a sense of power or opportunity, [engage in] inappropriate consumption behaviors ... of drugs or alcohol. [And] are also more likely to become pregnant at a young age” (Harris, 2004a, p. 14). Young women today are primarily constructed and many construct themselves through these discourses. Anita Harris (2004a) states, “In both of these images ... it is the feature of current times that render young womanhood a site of either new possibilities or problems that fill young women with confidence and

optimism, or, conversely, leave them alienated and self-destructive” (p. 14).

The 1990s also marked the shift in the ways that females began to be culturally represented within various forms of popular texts. Angela McRobbie (1997) refers to the sexualization of girls and women within magazines as new sexualities “which break discursively with the conventions of feminine behavior by representing girls as crudely lustful, desiring young women” (p. 196). Operating from a neo-Gramscian<sup>5</sup> perspective, McRobbie (2004) refers to popular culture as sites of struggle where girls actively negotiate between feminist liberalization and neo-conservative values and suggests that post-feminism (A.K.A. Third Wave feminism) be explored through what she terms as a double entanglement, “That is, the co-existence of neo-conservative values in relation to gender, sexuality and family life ... with processes of liberalization in regard to choice and diversity in domestic, sexual and kinship” practices (p. 4). Concerning the sexualization of childhood promoted and “furthered by legitimate industries and millions of satisfied customers,” Anne Higonnet (1998) posits, “[by] the 1990s, the image of the child has become perhaps the most powerfully contradictory image in western culture, promising the future but also turned nostalgically to the past, trading on innocence but implying sexuality, simultaneously denying and arousing desire” (p. 153).

Caught between ever evolving feminist discourses and popular culture’s re-interpretations of them, North American girls are “overloaded with ... contradictory messages about how one is to be, what one should believe what is right and wrong, and how one should look” (Ganetz, 1995, p. 78). Socially conditioned to embody fragmented and paradoxical sense of selves, girls have become a site of struggle in and of themselves actively negotiating between self-empowerment and self-loathing. Naomi Wolf ([1991] 2002) suggests, “there is a secret “underlife” poisoning our freedom; infused with notions of beauty, it is a dark vein of self-hatred, physical obsessions, terror of aging, and dread of lost control” (p. 10). Wolf explains,

The contemporary backlash is so violent because the ideology of beauty is the last one remaining of the old feminine ideologies

that still has the power to control those women whom second wave feminism have otherwise made relatively uncontrollable ... It is seeking right now to undo psychologically and covertly all the good things that feminism did for women materially and covertly. (p. 11)

Despite successful second wave feminist initiatives that laid the necessary groundwork for contemporary young girls to feel an empowerment of self that previous generations of women were not as privy to, the female gender is still governed by a political ideology that is deeply rooted in patriarchal modernist principles of power and agency. All systems such as family, peers, school, religion, culture, corporate, and government by which we females construct ourselves and are constructed by are still fixed upon notions of dominant and subordinate groups framed in terms of inequality and hierarchies based on class, gender, and age. (See Figure 9.)



Figure 9. Video still by Claudia

If the individual girl and woman want to affect and change the systemic rules that govern her subjective and objective selves then it is vital she become critically conscious of the systematic discourses that shape, limit, predict, control and define her paradoxical selves. Gillian Rose (2001) defines discourse as “a particular knowledge about the world which shapes how the world is understood and how things are done in it” (p. 136). Discourse produces subjects and sense of self is arrived at “through the operation of discourse” (pp. 136-7). Sheila Greene (2003)

posits that the self is comprised of a woman’s conscious and unconscious “multifaceted relationship to her world and her own experience” (p. 99). A sense of self is accomplished through a person locating herself in time through merging her objective and subjective selves. The objective self is what is actual and fixed in time and place, and the subjective self is her internal imagined world; both are “fundamental elements of each person’s experience of being in the world” (p. 99).

### A ‘Fourth Wave’ Model

In a society that systematically nurtures the objective self and prizes materiality as the ‘bottom line,’ I was interested in developing a pedagogical and research methodology that would call into action the subjective self. Inspired by a critical, liberatory, democratic, activist, and spiritual ethos (Freire, 1970; Gramsci, 1971; Chopra, 2004), I position the nurturing of inner wellbeing central to classroom praxis. The methodology invites the individual to recognize her power from within power that has nothing to do with physical appearance, and economical and cultural currencies by getting in touch with her inner voice and learning how to articulate it with clarity and critical intent. “At a deep level, you are the knower of reality ... If you turn inward and follow the path that leads to your inner intelligence, the knower will be there waiting for you” (Chopra, 2004, p. 96). By re-connecting with her inner self and becoming critically conscious of her objective self the individual can reconcile her selves and re-emerge with a united, holistic, and empowered sense of self. Despite hegemonic voices, one’s core values are still the greatest influence in the construction of self. Once she becomes critically aware of her core values and how they shape sense of self, sense of community, and sense of belonging in the larger world then she can intentionally act from an empowered stance. (See Figure 10.)



Figure 10. Video still by Lisa

Centered around students' lived experiences and using arts-based methods to intervene in one's future and re-shape a holistic sense of self, the three steps addressed in the methodology are:

1. *Meaningful self-awareness*: Getting in touch with your inner voice and understanding what it's trying to tell you about who you are, where you have been, and where you want to go.
2. *Critical conflict resolution*: Being aware of your goals and designing a road map to actualize them.
3. *Transformative social action*: Actualizing your potential and inspiring others to develop theirs.

Feeling comfortable to embark on this three-step journey, required that we transform our classroom into a safe space for collective participation as separate beings yet connected as one. Medical and spiritual doctor Deepak Chopra (2004) explains,

The collective psyche shares a level of awareness that goes beyond individuals. When you see other people as aspects of yourself, you are actually seeing faces of mythical types. We are one human being wearing countless masks. When all the masks are stripped off, what remains is essence, the soul, the divine spark. (p. 102)

Trust plays an essential role in the creation of a safe space for collective participation and a teacher's personal and educational philosophy is critical to this process. For me being 'human' means to embody critical consciousness, develop my self-worth, and potentiate my purpose as an ethical citizen of the world. For me being a 'teacher' means to de-centralize my role as 'teacher' to one that is shared equally with 'students.' To practice libratory learning we must all participate in the process of sharing, teaching, and learning. Paulo Freire ([1970] 2003) states, "The *raison d'être* of libertarian education ... lies in its drive towards reconciliation. Education must begin with the solution of the teacher-student contradiction, by reconciling the poles of the contradiction so that both are simultaneously teachers *and* students" (p. 58).

Modeling a 'way of being' that is open-minded, trusting, relatable, communicative, and non-hierarchical is fundamental for the encouragement of trust and authentic exchange. From the first day that I step into any classroom, 'students' recognize early on that like them, I too am an emotional and thinking being, interested in similar topics, passionate about the same issues, deal with stress, have hopes and dreams, and eager to have critical conversations about the daily experiences that shape our lives, sense of selves, and views of the world.

Dialogical praxis is a means by which authentic exchange occurs. As Freire explains,

Through dialogue, the teacher-of-the-students and the-students-of-the-teacher cease to exist and a new term emerges: teacher-student with students-teachers. The teacher is no longer merely the-one-who-teaches, but one who is [her]self taught in dialogue with the students, who in turn while being taught also teach. They become jointly responsible for a process in which all grow. In this process, arguments based on "authority" are no longer valid; in order to function, authority must be *on the side* of freedom, not *against* it. (p. 63)

For education to be meaningful, memorable, owned and empowering, it is paramount that it becomes personally relevant for every participant. Lived experiences such as our past and present love interests, family

and peer relationships, our adaptive and maladaptive coping skills, the meanings behind our tattoos, our experiences of getting them, and our struggles, hopes and dreams were daily sites for dialogical praxis. (See Figure 11.)



Figure 11. Video still by Lisa

In order to nurture self-actualization and social action it was necessary that the girls identify with and understand each others' feelings and difficulties. Arts-based techniques coupled with dialogical praxis were used to elicit empathy and compassion. Claudia Mitchell and Sandra Weber (2004) explain,

Artful representation works well when it facilitates empathy or enables us to see through the researcher-artist's eye. Hearing or seeing or feeling the details of a lived experience, its textures and shapes, helps make the representation trustworthy or believable, and helps the viewer see how the researcher-artist's experience relates to their own as well as the ways in which it differs. (p. 985) (See Figure 12.)



Figure 12. Collage by Leigh

Using visual production tools such as art, photography, journaling, performance, and video to re-frame, re-present, and re-construct meaning making, and allocating the classroom as the distribution channel, the girls were encouraged to reflect, engage, create, build, and transform. Each was invited to express her inner world using visuality, sound, and alphabetical text, and offer her own understanding of what it means to be her.

## **Part Two: The Journey**

### **Meaningful Self-Awareness**

*Getting in touch with your inner voice and understanding what it's trying to tell you about who you are, where you have been, and where you want to go.*

### **Becoming The Researcher**

Images can be used to lie, to question, to imagine, to critique, to theorize, to mislead, to flatter, to hurt, to unite, to relate, to narrate, to explain, to teach, to represent, and to express the full range of human emotion, knowledge, and experience. Like words, images are part of who we are, who we think we are, and who we become—they are integral to questions of identity and purpose. (Weber, 2007, p. 1)

To nurture self-awareness, I invited the girls to explore personally relevant topics by engaging them in preliminary arts-based self-inquiry exercises such as reflective journal writing, emotional mapping, and assemblage of new and already existing images. As an effective way to incorporate and re-organize their preliminary work into a digital medium, I introduced the still film genre. Throughout this process the girls learned how to identify and organize their ideas and emotions, storyboard them, use images to narrate meaning, experiment with the video editing software, and incorporate sound to support their narrative. These still films—films in and of themselves—became digital storyboards for their final original film productions. (See Figure 13.)



Figure 13. Journal entry by Altais

To provide insight into this process I share one student's journey; her name is Altais. For her still film, Altais explored the topic of memory. The style of her film resembles that of a digital journal entry where through reflective and reflexive writing she speaks back to herself about herself. Arranged to a David Bowie (1993) song entitled *Bring Me the Disco King* her film entitled *Goodbye* includes a poem she wrote accompanied by original and copyrighted still images gathered from the Internet. The first image appearing in her film is one of a tombstone with a dead rose laid onto top. The words displayed on the stone read, "When someone you love becomes a memory." The first few words of the song are:

You promised me the ending would be clear, you'd let me know

when the time was now, don't let me know when you are opening the door, stab me in the dark, let me disappear. Memories that flutter like bats of out hell ... life wasn't worth the balance or the crumpled paper it was written on. Don't let me know we're invisible. (Bowie, 1993, ¶1)

The lines in her poem read,

Mistakes are what shape us, its origins are concealed in memory. It's an interconnected system. Like a dream catcher, mistakes capture what you hold dear, they capture what you thought was long gone ... I'm telling you this because I trust and love you. What triggers the stills of our lives to flashback ... ? What mistakes shape the you of today ... ? Love you for who you are. (Altais, personal communication, January 5, 2006) (See Figure 14.)



Figure 14. Image from still film *Goodbye* by Altais

In an email to me, Altais explains her process as she tries to understand what her inner voice is saying about who she is, where she has been, and where she would like to go:

Now that I think about it, what I wanted to talk about was past conflicts with our dreams. Sometimes, our dreams are born from what is thought to be gone. I don't know if that makes sense ... Depending on our memories, they are what drive us to take the

paths in life that we dare take. Good or bad memories, we thrive to move on, according to which way seems best suited for us to take. And the girl in the picture with the knife and tear blood is me. (Altais, personal communication, January 15, 2006) (See Figure 15.)



Figure 15. Journal entry by Altais

By providing me a glimpse into their inner worlds and subjective selves, the girls' self-inquiring processes enabled me to assist each in finding her 'intentional' voice. To facilitate Altais in finding her voice, many emails journeyed back and forth between us as we discussed her exploratory voyage inward, the narrative structure she chose, what she was trying to say with her choice of imagery, and how this film could be further developed for next term's project.

Altais chose many thought provoking images to depict her memory of emotions concerning a series of events that occurred in her life, but, for me, there were six—along with her soundtrack that narrated a consistent theme of isolation, pain, and powerlessness: a girl's arm covered in cuts, a blood tear flooding out of a girl's eye, a stuffed animal covered in pins, a drawing of herself in her school uniform with no head, and arms tied behind her back, Christ nailed to the cross, and a pink haired girl with two different colored eyes followed by the words "Love you for who you are." (See Figure 16.)



Figure 16. Illustration by Altais

As I got to know Altais, I interpreted this work as her desire to talk about her sense of alienation and what she may have been going through. I approached her and asked if she was self-injuring and she replied that she used to but that it had been two years since her last cut. I asked her if she would like to investigate this topic for her next film and offered to help in any way that I could. As a teenager and young adult, I myself engaged in various forms of self-injuring behavior and was not foreign to her pain or her willingness to be 'discovered,' 'heard,' and 'helped.' Altais said, "Yes," and together our journey began. (See Figure 17.)



Figure 17. Journal entry: *Emotional map by Altais:*  
 "What do you hold dear? Liberation, moving on, express[ion]..."

### Critical Conflict Resolution:

*Being aware of your goals and designing a road map to actualize them.*

### Becoming The Filmmaker

In her second film, for possible future screening opportunities outside of school, she created all original images and sound and kept in mind the metaphorical value in recounting her compelling story. Because she was a minor, I explained the possible repercussions of revealing her identity on camera and suggested she discuss this matter with her parents. She was afraid to confront them, not wanting to bring up the past and instead opted for a creative yet anonymous approach. Altai is the main and only character represented in her film.

Becoming a filmmaker of her life required that she ask herself many questions to determine the direction of her story. Her journal became a safe space for this self-inquiring process:

I was very concerned not to bore or traumatize the viewers too much so I asked myself specific questions to help determine what story I will tell. The sort of questions I asked myself were basic things like:

“When did I start cutting?” *I started in Secondary Two.*

“Why did I start cutting, what was my reason?” *Family issues.*

“What help did I seek out?” *I called the Kid Help Phone Line, I reached out to my dad, friends, and I visited a psychologist.*

“Did my parents know?” *Yes, I confronted them but did not give them the details.*

“What did it feel like to cut?” *It felt horrible and yet releasing.*

“How did I struggle out of it?” *Little by little, I collected good memories and used them to repel the dependence.* (Altai, personal communication, February 16, 2006) (See Figure 18.)

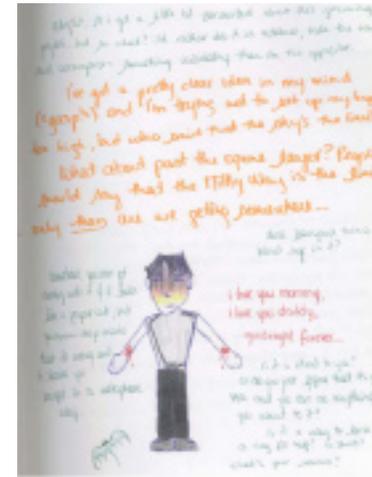


Figure 18. Journal entry by Altai: “Is it a ritual to you? Or do you just forget that it’s your skin and you can do anything you want to it? Is it a way to lash out or a cry for help? A stunt? What’s your reason?”

Once she became clear of her filmmaking goals, she defined her film’s intention into one two-part research question: “How can I educate others on the subject of cutting? And, how will sharing my story help me?”

### Audio and Visual Production

To capture her audio, Altai selected the video diary method. By turning the video camera on herself she used it like a microphone and, in the style of a diary entry, organically spoke into the camera about her journey through cutting and towards recovery. To add to her audio narration she produced an original music score and within the same style of her still film, she wrote and audio recorded a poem.

For her visuals she used photography and video. Using her body as the canvas, like a performance, she decorated it with key words painted in red. In fake red blood she writes ‘Cry’ near her eye, ‘Bliss’ on a tag hanging from her toe, ‘Can’t deal’ on her knee, ‘Please’ on her neck, ‘Tired’ on one arm, ‘Addict’ on the other, ‘Dead inside’ on her shoulder, ‘Weep’ on her heart, “Submit’ on her hands, ‘Hooked’ on her forehead,

'Hate' on one forearm, 'Heart me' on the other, and 'Ritual' on her chest. Like separate canvases, section by section she photographed her body parts. It is important to note that none of her photographs illustrate physical scars. (See Figure 19.)



Figure 19. Still by Altais from *Corpsegirl Anatomy*

Combined with this series, she shot additional photographs of meaningful spaces, nature and artifacts, and used video to document a burning candle. (See Figures 20, 21, and 22).



Figure 20, 21, and 22. Still clips from *Corpsegirl Anatomy*

## Audio and Visual Post-Production

For photo, video and audio editing Altais worked on a *Windows*® platform. For photo editing she used *PhotoShop*® and for video and sound editing she used *Movie-Maker*®. For her audio narration, after capturing and importing her video diary footage into the video editing software, she reviewed, selected, and organized her clips into the timeline. She separated the audio from the video diary footage, and discarded the video portion.

To audio record her poem and for music production, she worked on a Mac computer in the software *Soundtrack Pro*®. When completed, she used a USB key to move her audio from one computer to the other. She imported her narrated poem and soundtrack into the *Movie-Maker*® software, and organized the clips along with the other audio into the timeline. For her visual narration, she inserted her photographs and video clips at key points to match up with her audio, adjusted the timing of each image, and added transitions between them. Her film is entitled *Corpsegirl's Anatomy*, is 10 minutes in length, and approximately 4 minutes of it appears in *This Is My Body*.

## Girl Interrupted

The following section illustrates the various challenges we experienced along our way and how we dealt with them, individually and as a group. I can't pretend that everything went smoothly when it didn't. There were many times early on in the school year where I was called into the principal's office concerning my democratic style of teaching in the classroom and the contemporary content addressed in both my art class with 12 year old girls,<sup>6</sup> and in my media class with 16 year old girls. Although I run the risk of misrepresenting voices and circumstances by sharing only one case in detail, I share it because it is the only way to provide a glimpse into the kind of content that emerged when the girls took the lead in their education. The written excerpts are not intended to vilify anyone rather they are paramount to understanding the evolution of our critical pedagogical process and what it meant, to quote Nita Freire,

“to act in a freedom way denying the status quo” (personal communication, March 12, 2008).

Since the girls were exploring critical and emotionally charged issues, with the guidance counselor’s permission, I suggested they contact her for individual emotional support and additional research on their chosen topics. Altais took this advice and knocked on her door. Once informed of Altais’ direction without first consulting me or seeing her film in progress immediately she censored her film for fear it would trigger others in the school to start cutting. Informing me of her decision and referring to an educational psychologist who recently lectured on this topic, in an email to me the guidance counselor writes, “In [the psychologist’s] discussion of critical issues, [she] stressed that [cutting] is very contagious behavior and should not be discussed in class, poems or films” (Guidance Counselor, personal communication, March 18, 2006). That evening I received an email from Altais:

I spoke to [the guidance counselor] about my documentary and [she] disapproved of its production. She actually urges that I do not complete it or show it to anyone because she came back from a seminar, which dealt with self-mutilation. Apparently, if you do group meetings, movies, poems or any other sort of activity with others dealing with cutting, it will heighten the risk of other people to cut themselves ... I’m completely bummed out by this. I don’t want to harm anyone it was never my intention, but I need to do this film. I tried to explain to [her] but she won’t change her verdict. Apparently, it’s better to censor it than to shed light on such a subject. It made me so angry!!! ... I certainly do not want to change my topic. It was my choice in the beginning and it will be to the end. This film was to originally be a therapy for me and a lesson/message to the audience... I tried comparing my movie to that of anorexia and bulimia. Doesn’t that sort of elevate the chance of someone wanting to do that? And you know what she replied? “That’s under a different circumstance. It’s been talked about before.” Well, maybe if you talk about cutting, people would be more aware of it and would keep in mind that it is in a way like eating disorders!!! What does it take for some people to

actually understand?! ... Grr ... (Altais, personal communication, March 18, 2006)

I did not want any harm to come to the girls or me, and having spent six months engaged in lengthy preliminary work with each of them, I found it difficult to believe that this would cause others in our class to self-injure. On the contrary, having been privy to knowing about other girls in both of my classes who were cutting, I saw Altais as a brave humanitarian who was willing to put her face on this issue to help educate others on how to stop this maladaptive coping behavior. This was both an opportunity for her to put closure to past events and to become a mentor to her classmates by modeling transformative action.

Nevertheless, I was concerned by the guidance counselor’s reaction and decided to further inform myself on this topic. I consulted the specialist she had referred to and reviewed her online *PowerPoint*® presentations about people who self-injure and the protocols taken by schools in dealing with this issue. According to her research, there is still little known on ways that schools are effectively dealing with this problem. After reviewing the material, I emailed her about my situation and she arranged for a telephone interview with me.

She was most informative and helpful, and explained the difficulty in what I was trying to accomplish within a school structure. She stressed that school health professionals and administrators prefer to caution on the side of safety through censorship, then to take the risk in dealing with this issue in the wrong way. According to her, there was evidence to support the trigger effect, hence the guidance counselor’s reaction. She explained that in the past when girls wrote reflectively and descriptively about exactly what they used to cut themselves with, and spoke of the taste of blood as a calming effect, this encouraged others to experiment.

I am not an expert on the phenomenon of self-injury and I can see how if not dealt with responsibly, a backlash could occur, but as a person who self-injured throughout her teenage and young adult years I can safely say that in my case I was not influenced by others instead I found friends who were just as mixed up as me. Looking back, I wish I had an art or media class to provide me with a healthier outlet to express

my pain, frustration, confusion, and sadness, and, thank goodness this did eventually happen. At the age of 21, upon entering into an undergraduate art education program, I discovered painting and learned how to healthily vomit my feelings onto a canvass. By having a visual medium to mirror back my potential and strength to survive and thrive, I was able to stop my maladaptive coping behaviors and slowly develop a healthier sense of self.

Having shared where I was coming from, the specialist expressed that my argument was strong and our approach was effective. She offered to speak to the school principle and the guidance counselor on my behalf and in support of how the girls were approaching critical issues in our classroom but sadly no follow-up from them occurred.

After informing myself, I was confident that our approach was solid so I took matters into my own hands. I urged Altais to be upfront with her parents and gain their permission to complete her film. In an email to Altais, I write:

... Tell your parents everything and get their consent for you to continue forward. Honesty with your family is the best policy, they have your best interest at heart and I wouldn't want us to proceed without their understanding and consent. This project is supposed to help bring closure to your situation and possibly become a communication vehicle between yourself and your family. Let's see if this is possible ... No matter what happens though, I am very proud of you

PS. I thought to pass this quote onto you...it comes from one of my favorite scholars, Paolo Freire (1970), a major inspiration behind our classroom praxis. I think you would enjoy reading his book! It's called *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*.

An act of violence is any situation in which some men prevent others from the process of inquiry ... any attempt to prevent human freedom is an 'act of violence.' Any system, which deliberately tries to discourage critical consciousness is guilty of oppressive violence. Any school,

which does not foster students' capacity for critical inquiry is guilty of violent oppression. (1970, p. 74) (Leanne, personal communication, March 19, 2006)

The censorship placed on Altais' film unnerved many of the students for fear that their films will also become censored. They were not wrong. Shortly after, I was requested by the principle to submit a list of the girls' film topics for their review. I gladly did and in addition I emailed this list to the parents of every student. The list of topics included drug addiction, racial rape, suicide, bullying, illness, divorce, eating disorders, and homosexuality, just to name a few. It is important to note that these topics were based on the girls' first term research and film projects, and selected for their personal relevance in the girls' lives. This was an opportunity for all of us to re-understand critical issues from personal, diverse perspectives.

Although I had spoken on numerous occasions with many of the girls' parents who shared their excitement and appreciation for the work we were doing, to avoid further censorship and confusion, and for the girls' and my own protection, I invited the parents to voice their opinions on whether or not we should continue forward. Given that democracy was critical to our process, this conflict offered us each the opportunity to place it front and center. I requested that each girl email me her response to the censorship and every parent read and sign their daughter's letter of intention<sup>7</sup> in agreement that she continue working on her film. And, if one parent or student disapproved of any subject all agreed to make the necessary adjustments. Everyone approved, and every girl continued making her film. One mother head of the *Mother's Guild* even spoke with the principle on our behalf. To say the least, although this was a frightening and challenging time for all of us, this experience catapulted us each to re-evaluate what it truly meant to have a democratic voice and use it for justice and change. Every student emailed me her response and I forwarded many of them (removing their names) to the principle. The following three responses are examples of what the girls wrote, how they felt, and what the principle read:

**Response #1:**

In our media class, some of our movies have been censored. Is this fair? Not really. Why, you may ask? Because I know for a fact that the subjects students are touching upon in our class are strong. What makes these topics so powerful is the fact that these issues are real. Whether or not you want to accept it is a different story. However, that is the problem here. The problem isn't the fact that these issues are too graphic or vulgar, it is because some people in this school see these movies and are afraid. They are scared of facing the truths of our lives. The majority of people in this world are living lives that are far from perfect and normal, which is what some people such as teachers and the administration do not seem to understand. A teenager faces problems that are much deeper and larger than failing a math test. Problems such as teenage pregnancies, depression, suicide, alcohol and drug addiction, and cases of sexual abuse are real, and are taking place in a teenager's life everyday. Instead of viewing our movies as being unacceptable, many should come to realize that for some students this is the only way they feel they can cope with their problems. (Christina, personal communication, March 24, 2006)

**Response #2:**

Ever since there was censorship on Altai's piece, I felt a little uneasy because I give her so much credit to actually have the balls to explore and confront an issue that has touched her life so deeply, and, yet, at the same time, some people are afraid to see the truths of what can really happen. I am so appreciative that she wants to make you, the class and I apart of her learning and growth experience. (Lisa, personal communication, March 24, 2006)

**Response #3:**

Sometimes older people don't take in information and ideas as

we do and consequently, movies can get censored, like they did in our class. Evidently, the administration did not and does not understand the reasoning behind our movies. I honestly believe that more people can cope with issues and problems affecting their lives through making their media. Making movies, for me, is an amazing privilege because through them I can talk to many people about an important issue in my life. I think that all of the topics our class is covering are pertinent issues that, in the end, will have an impact on all of us, whether or not the issues directly relate to our lives. I am really happy that we got this opportunity to express our feelings. (Vanessa, personal communication, March 24, 2006)

Although I never received formal permission from the principal to continue forward, with the support of her parents, classmates and myself, Altai decided to continue making her film but was still undecided whether she will screen it to her entire class once completed. With greater insight into her process, in an email to me, Altai writes:

...it is a bit of a living hell, but it's better to explore and reflect back than to relapse, am I not right? It's therapy, like I've always said. My parents are okay with it, they are just worried about my identity. They see my intention clearly, but they want to protect their baby in a sense, so I don't blame them. This media class helps me to gain a better idea of who I was and what I have become and teaches me how to use different media techniques and my mind to creatively illustrate my sense of self. Like a double-edged work of art, on one side, it's beautiful, it tells a story and has morals, flaws, characters, a climax, a dénouement and a resolution and, on the other side, it's painful and difficult. It's like going back and reopening the wounds in order to fully capture what it was and what it meant. In other words, this class is a haunting bliss. It's demanding, but also a salvation. I can't think of any other class where I can do (almost) whatever I want, without pissing off the teacher or dragging my parents to a parent/teacher interview for some reason like "disturbing the class." It's

a class where I feel like I can say anything and still be encouraged to dig deeper.

My real intention is to “move on” and deal with what I’ve experienced in the past not just cutting but everything else in general. Past friendships that didn’t work out, the difficulties I’ve faced while growing up, etc. I wasn’t an abused child, that’s not what I’m saying, it’s just that there were things that got in the way and forced me to alternate the route and sometimes, change my goals entirely. I always plague my mind with the past as a way to keep myself focused, kind of like “Remember this, Altais? Do you want to go back to that? Do you want to find yourself alone with no one to help you? I didn’t think so ...” and a psychiatrist/psychologist isn’t going to remedy the situation. Instead of burying the hatchet, I might as well work at getting to the source and find a way to be at peace. I can’t ignore what occurred to me because it made me who I am today. But it’s a slow process to recover entirely. The movies you show us help with this process. All at once, I learn how to use different creative techniques, computer programs, and heal myself. You can see me with a focused expression when I work at it laboriously. You can find me with a grin on my face when I share my finished product with others. It’s a truly rewarding experience that I will certainly not regret. (Altais, personal communication, March 26, 2006)

### **Transformative Social Action:**

#### ***Actualizing your potential and inspiring others to develop theirs.***

Art is an extremely potent way of dealing through stress and pain...it provides an enormous release and everyone has access to it. Of course we cannot all afford to use cameras or play an instrument, but it can be as simple as having a pen and a piece of paper and drawing what you feel. Any type of creative expression draws heavily on the soul and is a healthy way of releasing your emotions and fears. It’s so difficult to share something you cre-

ated because it’s more than exposing your “talents,” you are also exposing your soul. Art is liberating and incredibly healthy and is a wonderful and easy alternative to self-destructive behavior. It’s a shame that more people haven’t discovered it. (Justine, personal communication, March 28, 2006)

I learned a lot about myself and others through these experiences. Showing the movies that I made on the big screen in front of everyone in the class was probably one of the scariest things I have ever done. Just the fact that I didn’t know how any one was going to react to them scared me but it was so worth it because in the end I realized that if I try, I can open up. Although I haven’t really faced anything that terrible in my life I felt so proud of those who were able to make their media as a therapeutic process to overcome extremely traumatic events. I am so touched that they were able to share something so personal with our class. (Erin, personal communication, May 22, 2006)

Olivia Gude (2007) states, “Armaking can be an important opportunity for students to further their emotional and intellectual development, to help formulate a sense of who they are, and who they might become” (p. 8). I present three video clips to demonstrate how Altais used her film to alter individual and collective consciousness, and initiate deep transformation. Chopra (2004) explains, “While still remaining who you are, you can bring about a quantum leap in your awareness, and the sign that the leap is real will be some emergent property you never experienced in the past” (pp. 108-110). The process of screening the girls’ films to each other and the classroom conversations that followed illustrate this quantum leap. The three video clips I present are: *Corpsegirl’s Anatomy* (See Figure 23), *Classmates Respond* (See Figure 24), and *One-On-One with Altais and Leanne* (See Figure 25.)

*Corpsegirl’s Anatomy* is a courageous and emotionally honest portrayal of a 16-year old girl who reflects on her downward spiral into cutting as a result of feeling lonely, alone, misunderstood, and unnoticed by those closest to her. Throughout her recount, she shares how losing her dog and having no one to comfort her in the home precipitated her

desire to cut. Spiraling out of control yet feeling connected to her core, Altais explains what it meant for her to use her body as a canvas for pain. Throughout this film she demonstrates how arts-based techniques enabled her to re-construct her situation, re-present herself, re-unite with others, and intervene in her future to shape a healthier sense of self. (Click on Figure 23.)

Figure 23. Video clip #1 *Corpsegirl Anatomy*. [\[click on title to view video\]](#)

This 7-minute video documentation of the girls' emotionally charged responses to Altais' film reveals the pivotal moment when they realized how much more there is to a person than what is represented by the objective self. In her film Altais uses images to represent her subjective self, and narration to represent her objective self. It was only in the act of sharing both did the girls begin to see Altais as a disturbing yet courageous mirror to themselves. Watching her film heightened individual and collective consciousness concerning what it means to develop a holistic sense of self and how important it is to look beyond the surface and recognize the other in oneself. By sharing her journey Altais reminded her classmates that empathy and compassion can inspire "transforming action [where people] can create a new situation, one which makes possible the pursuit of a fuller humanity" (Friere, 1970, p. 47). (Click on Figure 24.)

Figure 24. Video clip #2 *Classmates Respond*. [\[click on title to view video\]](#)

Viewing my role as an art educator who helps my students to make sense of their experiences and themselves it was necessary that Altais and I have a conversation to reflect on how the experience of sharing her film impacted her sense of wellbeing and her expectation of me as her facilitator. This third 5-minute video clip is a one-on-one interview between us that occurred in private after the screening of her film. (Click on Figure 25.)

Figure 25. Video clip #3 *One-On-One with Altais and Leanne*.  
[\[click on title to view video\]](#)

Youth, no matter the era, lack a sense of power because they are perpetually identified by parents, teachers, psychologists, school administrators, policy makers, and governments (just to name a few) as a generation in transition of 'becoming' but never celebrated for 'being.' Stephanie Etheridge Woodson (1999) explains, "Children have no voice in government or laws affecting their wellbeing. They have no vote in school curricula or testing, or in the reconfiguration of welfare. Fundamentally, children exercise no control over their bodies or their environments" (p. 41). Inherent with tension and feelings of powerlessness, cutting enabled Altais to distract herself from the realization that she has no control over others who affect her life. Although it was a temporary solution to re-assert and re-gain autonomy over her subjective and objective selves, it was a disabling ritual that dis-empowered the very person it served to empower. As Altais (2006, personal communication) testifies, "every time I did it, it felt right but after the feeling subsided I felt horrible, and I was back where I started, only worse."

Filmmaking provided Altais with a new and improved safe space to exit her body, see herself in a new light, to then re-enter the body, free of tension, and empowered. Seeing her situation and reactions to circumstances through the lens facilitated a connection to and a distancing from the self, which enabled her to gain a greater perspective and understanding of herself. Weber and Mitchell (2004) explain,

By its very nature, artistic self-expression taps into and reveals aspects of the self and puts us in closer touch with how we really feel and look and act, leading, potentially, to a deepening of the self-study. Yet, paradoxically, such acts as self-photographs, drawings of or by the researcher, and putting oneself into a role for autobiographic performance also force us to take a step back and look at ourselves from the new perspective provided by the medium itself, increasing the potential for a deeper self-analysis. (p. 984)

Re-framing her situation to re-consider her potential for inner wellbeing empowered Altais to put closure to past events and intervene in her future to re-shape how she understands herself and how others

understand her. Reflecting on this process, Altais concludes:

What it meant for me to open up about a lived experience required that I excavate the past and go beyond the surface to re-tell a part of my childhood. Every thing that I held back in my sessions with the psychologist came out after pressing the “record” button. It meant that I was no longer supposed to hide what I dreaded to say out loud. The freedom to speak out frightened me at first, because who would want to listen? But when I heard all the support from my classmates, it encouraged me to tell my story.

*Corpsegirl's Anatomy* is a personal memoir in a sense of what is still remembered. Sharing my story is the final step in my treatment. It is a way to face it and accept for what it was—a part of my past. My experience on self-mutilation is a chapter in my life, which I want to be rid of, and I created this film as a way to make amends with myself and face it. Everything we do is a part of the past, which influences our future selves. I wanted to frame my story and show, via personal experience, how important it is to quit this addiction and advance towards self-help or through the guidance of entourage. I'm addressing how vital it is to support such a person who is lacking confidence and not ignore them; let them know that you are there to help and not judge.

My intention was to shed light on a subject that is hard to understand and is often misunderstood. What we don't know shouldn't be ignored, to explore further brings more knowledge. In the process of making my film I was censored and urged to not make a film on anything related to self-mutilation because it may be psychologically and physically harmful to viewers. I want to break the silence that it has been given. It is something serious that must be dealt with and it needs to be addressed despite the myth that it may backfire and cause any sort of damage towards the listener. So little is talked about it. People need to know that there are at least two sides behind a story, before coming up with

their own point of view about an issue that has been deemed too taboo to speak of.

My self-esteem really grew once I learned that I was capable of making a film that can create such an impact on others. The fact that several peers came up to me to congratulate me was something I never knew was possible. Now I pass this on. (Altais, personal communication, June 1, 2006)

### **Conclusion**

Chopra (2004) states, “there are no wrong turns, only new turns ... What happens to you can affect how you think, relate to others, behave in a given situation, fit into your surroundings, perceive the future, or perceive yourself. All these dimensions must evolve in order for you to evolve” (p. 97). Although I was only able to share one student's journey, Altais' is a metaphor for all of ours as we each in our own ways use the past to intervene in the future, and celebrate the now. Katie writes:

Using my lived experience as a basis for making media allowed me to get in touch with a side of me I was never in touch with before. It gave me the opportunity to grow and to have a voice of my own. It showed me how important it is to have my own mind and not be afraid to stand up for myself and in what I believe. I have discovered that I am able to connect with myself on a much deeper and sensitive level. I have been able to find motives to release emotions from past experiences, realize the positive in any given situation, and discover a stronger person within my soul. (Katie, personal communication, June 3, 2006)

Needless to say, I was not invited back to teach the following school year. Having been transparent with my students all along, the day that I was notified of this reality I stood before them with the news. Despite my sadness to not have the opportunity to experience this course with other girls at the school I was proud of our accomplishments and

wanted to remain focused on them. The challenges we confronted individually and collaboratively along our way enabled us each to look into the mirror and ask many pertinent questions:

- What does being a girl mean to Me?
- Am I the only one who feels and thinks this way?
- What is my inner voice telling me and how can I learn how to articulate it?
- What limits my potential for inner wellbeing?
- How can I become a happier and healthier person?
- How can I use my creativity to communicate with others?
- How do I see my role as an ethical and critically conscious citizen of the world?
- What does it mean to be political? (See Figure 26.)



Figure 26. Photo-voice by Charlotte

Putting into practice the rigorous training necessary to answer these questions facilitated us all to discover and embody a new discourse of girlpower, that of inner wellbeing. Self-actualization is the ultimate facilitator of freedom and justice. By re-framing our tensions to re-consider our intentions, we expressed our deepest concerns, challenged our situations, became aware of our core values, evolved our sense of selves, and

re-emerged as political beings. By becoming researchers and filmmakers of our own and each other's lives, and in sharing our stories we realized that there was more that united us than that which divided us. Dictated by libertarian values our classroom became a microcosm of empathy, compassion and freedom as we utilized each other as mirrors to deflect a sense of isolation and reflect back a stronger sense of community, belonging, and self-worth. Together, we demonstrated to each other and to ourselves that with tolerance, humanity, and solidarity, a kinder world is possible. Sabrina writes:

What I have discovered about myself ... Because of this experience I have gotten to know girls that I have socialized with for years but didn't really know. Their movies seemed like gifts, especially for me. This is where I have found my therapy and regained strength and reassurance in myself. And honestly, I am crying while writing this. I don't feel like such a freak anymore. I'm not the only one who has been self-destructive, who has had to rebuild themselves internally, and who sometimes underestimates the magnitude of consequences and doesn't have the strength to overcome them once they occur. This experience was the most important thing I have ever gained while at this school.

What I have discovered about others ... Our situations may be different but our reactions maybe the same. Our situations may be the same but our reactions may be different. We may be different or we may have things in common but no matter what, as human beings, we are rooted to something greater, something common. We all look for fulfillment. We all want to be at peace with ourselves, even when we are looking for acceptance from others. No matter what, the motive is always to be content with us. We all face a variety of different things, but challenges are challenges and we all need to cope with them to better our situations. As human beings we need belonging and unity to get through life. Media as we know it makes peace and happiness die a little everyday but if we can change it according to how we've approached it this year, we can create that basic unity, belonging, happiness and

peace that every soul must thirst for. (Sabrina, personal communication, June 3, 2006)

Change is never an easy feat but when it is approached with intentional action, it is worth every struggle. To quote abolitionist Frederick Douglass (1849), “If there is no struggle, there is no progress” (p. 204). I share this journey specifically with teachers, the academy, and girls because I want to express what it meant for us to implement a critical libertarian pedagogy within a school system that is still governed by authoritarian and hierarchical concepts of power and agency, and to raise the question: If one believes that art production is an opportunity to express and communicate oneself, to critically, reflectively and reflexively engage with lived experience to better understand it, to develop consciousness, to potentiate inner wellbeing, to actualize transformative action, and to practice authentic democracy then who gets to determine what is deemed ‘acceptable’ for classroom content?

The collaged film *This Is My Body: A Film By High School Girls* exists to unite voices of the girls’ with whom I have worked, distribute their experiences, and pay homage to girls who refused to remain silent. We hope this film inspires others to speak their truths, and mobilizes teachers and students to become each other’s protective umbrellas and unite for personal, institutional, and systemic change.

## End Note

*This is My Body* is accompanied by a *Teacher’s Guide* and is internationally distributed by the *National Film Board of Canada*. To purchase *This Is My Body* and use it to transform your class into a safe space to consider, re-consider, and transform limits to inner wellbeing, to share, democratize, and globalize voice, and to ignite, lead, and exemplify social action, please visit: <http://www.nfb.ca/collection/films/fiche/?id=55218>

To read more about the girls’ self-actualizing journeys as media makers, please visit: [http://web.mac.com/pinkpolitics/pinkpolitics/Meet\\_the\\_girls.html](http://web.mac.com/pinkpolitics/pinkpolitics/Meet_the_girls.html). On the last day of school, I invited Altaïs to turn the camera on me. To read the transcript of this interview, please visit: <http://web.mac.com/pinkpolitics/pinkpolitics/Leanne.html>

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### **About the Author**

Leanne Levy works as an arts-based therapist teaching girls and women how to become researchers and filmmakers of their own lives. As an art educator, filmmaker, and community activist she specializes in facilitating and implementing media-based intervention programs related to girls' emotional development and wellbeing needs. Leanne is affiliated with the National Film Board of Canada and Concordia University. She can be reached through her website at <http://web.mac.com/pinkpolitics> or directly at [pinkpolitics@mac.com](mailto:pinkpolitics@mac.com).