

CUS

Research Brief

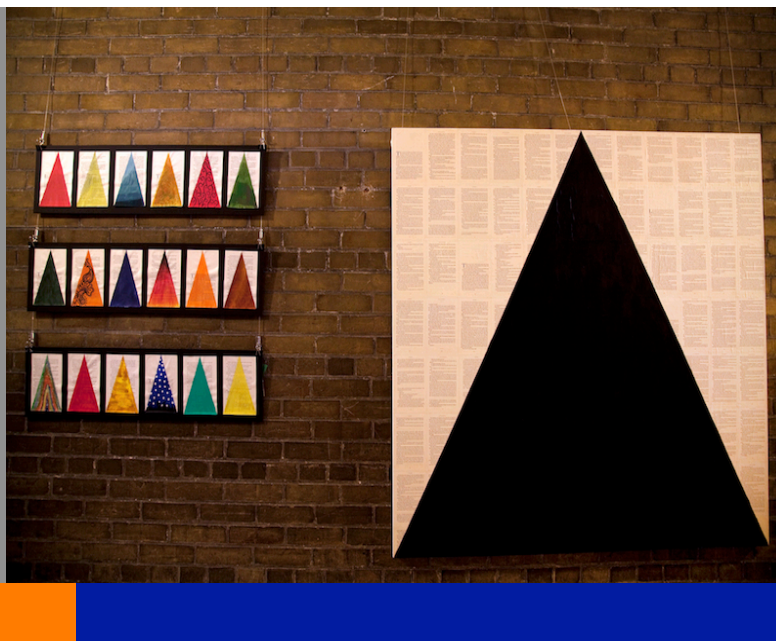


Image from After/Night, Rob Simon and the Teaching to Learn Project, 2013.

Critical Practitioner Research at CUS: An Interview with Dr. Rob Simon

By Audrey Hudson

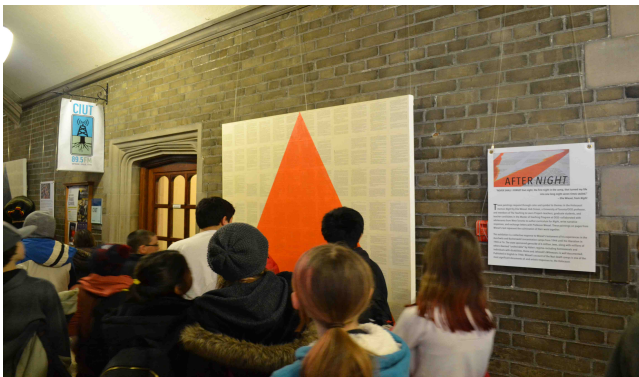


Rob Simon is Assistant Professor in the department of Curriculum, Teaching and Learning at OISE. His scholarship explores the intersection of critical literacy and practitioner research in urban schools.

In 2015, Dr. Simon received the **Early Researcher Award** from the Ontario Ministry of Research and Innovation, which will support five years of a project entitled “Addressing Injustices: Teachers and Adolescents Coauthoring Social Justice-Oriented Literacy Curriculum.” This involves grade 8 students at Delta Alternative School in the TDSB working with OISE teachers to author curriculum for young adult novels addressing social issues, and co-researching that process together.

Our Mission Statement

The Centre for Urban Schooling was established in 2005 to connect OISE to urban schools and communities. The Centre conducts research on and advocates for critical practice that is focused on how to better serve historically marginalized and racialized children and youth in public schools.



Middle school students view “After Night” exhibition of paintings by youth and Master of Teaching Program (MT) teachers. This exhibition was held at Hart House, University of Toronto, February 2013. This project formed the basis of the documentary film “After Night” (2015) [www.afternightfilm.com], as well as publications and presentations co-authored with OISE students, teachers, and youth.

1. Could you tell us about the research projects you are engaged in with CUS?

Last year, I worked with Centre for Urban Schooling Director Dr. Tara Goldstein and Dr. Nicole West-Burns to develop a new focus on critical practitioner research in CUS. This new direction for CUS connects directly with my interests in collaborative research with youth and teachers. I worked with the CUS team to develop several new initiatives that build on my current program of research and teaching related to critical practitioner research in urban schools.

The first of these projects is the **Critical Practitioner Research Collaborative (CPRC)**, which connects teachers and graduate students in Toronto with colleagues at University of Pennsylvania. We have held a number of events already, including video links that have

allowed graduate students at Penn and OISE to share their research in progress and analyze data collaboratively.

We are in the process of developing a **Toronto Writing Project**, a site of the National Writing Project (NWP), in CUS. The Writing Project is the largest peer-to-peer research-based professional development organization for teachers in the world. We envision a Toronto Writing Project supporting critical practitioner researchers to initiate grassroots change efforts in urban classrooms, schools, and communities. With the help of CUS graduate students Will Edwards and Shiny Balachandran we developed a set of core principles, including:

1. The understanding that teachers are well positioned to be able to develop knowledge that can support peer-to-peer professional development, inform research, and encourage the learning and life chances of diverse students in Toronto

schools.

2. Writing is a mechanism for addressing equity issues across subject areas, connected to formal and informal research opportunities for youth and teachers working individually and collaboratively.

CUS has supported my ongoing research, including **The Teaching to Learn Project (TTL)**, involving teachers and youth in participatory research projects. These have included a project we called “After *Night*,” involving youth and teachers creating an exhibition of paintings on book pages of the Holocaust memoir *Night*.

In February, with the Centre for Media and Culture in Education, CUS co-sponsored a screening of a film about this project and panel discussion with youth and teachers (<http://www.afternightfilm.com>).



Addressing injustices: Youth and MT teachers developing curriculum and sample project for *Maus*, a Diorama exploring empathy and Holocaust denial. 2015.



2. Why do you believe the methodology of critical practitioner research has a lot of offer educational researchers?

Critical practitioner research is a methodology that suggests that teachers are both capable of and well-positioned to generate knowledge from practice and its inherent material realities, including broader social inequities. This research is often participatory and oriented toward change efforts in and out of schools. In the process of documenting and theorizing teaching, critical practitioner researchers negotiate the meaning of their work in relationship with students, colleagues, and community members. Unlike other qualitative methodologies such as ethnography, the intention of critical practitioner research is

not merely to surface and document patterns, but to break with them, toward the goal of improving the learning and life chances of diverse students.

This process requires educators to challenge their own preconceptions. What Cochran-Smith & Lytle (e.g., 2009) have called an *inquiry stance* may involve, for example, taking a skeptical view of bureaucratic labels imposed on students. Critical practitioner researchers raise questions about larger social and political arrangements of schooling that position students negatively. In the process, they attempt to enact alternatives, for and with youth and colleagues.

3. What research goals do you have for yourself in the coming year?

I have a number of goals, including finding new ways to use the arts and film to invite youth and teachers to collaborate in the research process.

For example, my recently funded study **Addressing Injustices** involves teachers, including lead teacher Sarah Evis, and students at a TDSB alternative school, Delta, who will collaborate with teacher candidates in the Master of Teaching program at OISE to author critical literacy curriculum for young adult novels that explore social issues and co-research that process.

We have already begun this work over the past year, and are excited to expand the project. We are currently working with Grade 8 students at Delta to author curriculum for and complete a conceptual art project in response to Art Spiegelman's graphic novel *Maus: A Survivor's Tale*. This collaboration has involved partnerships with Facing History and Ourselves and the AGO. We plan to exhibit students' artwork later this year.



On Critical Practitioner Research at the Centre for Urban Schooling

One of the most exciting aspects of our critical practitioner research initiatives is that they have allowed us to develop a strong community among faculty and students in CUS who are interested in collaborative, equity-based research in urban schools. I am excited to continue to develop opportunities to deepen those partnerships we have begun this year. We have successfully expanded our Critical Practitioner Research Collaborative, and are already planning events for the coming year. And we are in the process of forming our advisory committee for the Toronto Writing Project. I am looking forward to expanding this and other initiatives in the coming year.

Thank you for interest in the Centre for Urban Schooling! Let's stay in touch. To join our list serve and receive announcements about our events, please email: audrey.hudson@mail.utoronto.ca with the subject heading: Put me on the CUS list serve.

Check out our website and find us on social media!

<http://cus.oise.utoronto.ca>



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