

# THE RACETRACK

## Translating Ideas Into Reality Through Artifact

by Ron Grady

**A**rtifacts. They are powerful tools that, understood correctly, carry rich stories about the people who create them and the places where they are created. Often we imagine artifacts as the province of disciplines such as anthropology or, in earlier years, classes such as history or social studies. However, artifacts are all around us in the world of the young child, and the stories they tell about their creators and contexts are no less interesting when those are children and a classroom, respectively. A variety of research suggests a few things about children's artifacts.

Artifacts are windows into children's experiences (e.g. Blaisedell, Arnott, & Wall, 2019; Ghiso, 2015), and can inform us about children's skills across a variety of domains (e.g. Chen & McNamee, 2007; Geist, 2016). Artifacts can reveal children's thoughts, feelings, and opinions about locales and spaces (e.g. Clark, 2011; McCann, 2014). Artifacts are a child's participation in the cultural heritage of humanity, and evidence that children have stories to

tell. Taken together, then, it seems as if these are not undergirded by a singular idea. Namely, that an artifact is both a result of and a tool for translation across many domains of thinking, creating, and imagining. Artifacts, therefore, merit our close attention as educators and those who work with and advocate for young children.

### Lost in Translation: From Desire to Construction and Back Again

I am sitting with a group of children on a rug after lunchtime. They are building. Andy and Tad are building a racetrack. The enthusiasm the friends

have is palpable. What is it about being on the cusp of creation that is such an intoxicating feeling? Whatever it is, it is alive and well in this moment. To begin, Andy starts taking all of the blocks off of the shelf—and I mean all of them! Tad helps him momentarily, but leaves once the rug begins to fill up with blocks. In what feels like a minute, the collaborative effort has disintegrated and Andy finds himself in the middle of a jumble of blocks.

Creative intention blooms from seeds that can only, perhaps, be labeled as desire—a desire to create something tangible, something that exists outside of the eye of the mind. For Andy, it begins with a desire to bring the mental



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*The racetrack in its final form.*

image he has of a racetrack into the physical world. Next, this desire must be translated at least twice. First, desire turns into an image of a “racetrack” and then this image of a racetrack must be translated into the motor movements of his hands. Andy moves from fantasy and desire to construction.

However, in the process of translation mentioned above, something was lost. Misinterpreted. Therefore, instead of the racetrack he intended, Andy ends up finding himself in a jumble of blocks that do not resemble his idea of a racetrack. This act of translation has, one might say, lost the meaning of his original thought and desire. Similar to a game of telephone, the initial utterance—in this case, the image of a racetrack—is lost in the act of translation between multiple mouths, ears, hands, and ideas.

### A Blank Slate: Translating Backward to Reconnect with Intention

Andy and I put the blocks away. Andy stacks them in groups of four and places them on the shelf. Friends join and leave when the work is finished. It takes less than two minutes for the rug to become clear again. Andy appears to be ready to resume construction.

Making space between the medium of creation and our original creative intention can be beneficial. After all, an idea is often most clear in its intangibility. Materials and constraint can muddle or dilute or redirect an idea. What is more, the physical proximity of materials, the scarcity of supplies, and the threat of transition often give an enhanced sense of urgency to children’s work.

In truth, it might have been quicker, easier, and just as exciting to take only a few of the blocks away, or to take none of them away and instead to have started stacking them up high



*Andy testing out the racetrack. Note his drawing in the foreground.*

or in shapes resembling my image of a racetrack. But not only would this have taught me nothing about Andy’s concepts, it would have also made the work about me and my ends. It would have robbed Andy of an opportunity to envision the process of translation in a different way.

### Artifact: A Tool in the Service of Translation

Before Andy can begin constructing again, I invite him to draw his racetrack, with the words, “Would you like to make a plan?” Andy, perhaps feeling he has nothing to lose, agrees.

In order to facilitate the creation of the translation of the intangible rendering of the racetrack in his mind into a physical medium, I provide Andy with a pen and paper. What I observe next is a series of lines connected via loops and swirls. He indicates a starting line and a finish line, and within a minute, his racetrack exists on paper.

The racetrack described above is an artifact that is child-created and child-oriented. However, it is also the product

of a teacher-initiated (or perhaps a better term is “teacher-invited”) situation. Indeed, despite the overarching child-centeredness I attempt to cultivate in my practice, the necessity of teacher-initiated invitation in helping children achieve their own ends has become increasingly apparent as I spend more and more years in classrooms, meeting children and striving to help them express themselves in a variety of mediums. Inviting Andy into this visual depiction of a racetrack allowed, on a deeper level and with time, the overall arc of our interaction to remain focused on his own ends. Ultimately, with time, Andy will become an increasingly efficient translator of his own ideas across various media.

### The Crescendo: A Racetrack Three Ways

Next, Andy chooses to proceed by taking down blocks again in groups of four. He begins by taking down a single group of four blocks. Next, he looks at the racetrack drawn in loops and swirls that he holds in his lap on a clipboard. He carefully positions the first set of four blocks. Thereafter, Andy returns to the drawn racetrack,



touching it, tracing it with his finger, speaking aloud about it. Then, back to the blocks. When he closes a loop, Andy tests out a single blue car along the track. With a 4-year-old flourish, he declares “I’m done,” and moves on. All that remains for us to look upon are a few pictures and the racetrack he drew—the latter a testament to imagination, perseverance, and evidence of a complex process of translation.

As our interaction draws to a close, the translation of Andy’s desires and ideas into their various forms occurs more rapidly. His desire to make the race-track and his idea about how to do it remain. However, now Andy has a new tool—an artifact created in the context of a teacher invitation—to guide him as he strives to translate his own thinking for himself.

In a final crescendo, we bear witness to the truth that an artifact is both a product of translation and, in a unique way, a tool in the process of translation between various modes of envisioning. And, really, what more could we ask for from a series of loops and swirls scrawled on a clipboard in the middle of an empty rug?

## References

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*Away the blocks go, in groups of four, back to the shelf.*