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Keeping Room for Artistry in the Art Room (And in All Learning)

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I share my ideas, here, not as a formal paper but as fodder for all of our imaginations...

Art rooms, especially in older buildings, are often found in a distant corner of a basement hallway. They are not always easy to locate. I have been lost a few times on sojourns to art rooms. A few years ago I was visiting Jen Deets when she was teaching at Prescott Elementary and her room was one of those rooms. Rooms I am all too familiar with, as in my previous life as an art teacher I taught in some very trying circumstances, spaces, and sometimes with difficult neighbors. Neighbors, not always tolerant of clay drippings up and down the hallway, drip drying textiles hanging here and there, etc. I am sure I learnt much about negotiating difficult personal relationships in these situations. On this particular day that I visit Jen's art room, her art room was being painted and so her classroom was relocated to a basement room, even more remote and around a few more twists and turns in the hallway. As I enter the make-shift art room I am immediately aware of student commitment to their work at hand—heart & hand. I do not recall the specifics of the assignment but a purposefulness,

seriousness, attentive, energy was palatable. Students were immersed in artistic process and I found myself drawn in and very much reluctant to leave. The learning context transcended the physical space. Talking with students about the artistic engagement, listening to their interactions with others, watchful of their deliberations and judgments, the artistic process is made visible as artistic forms emerge. Students negotiate the materials they are working with and respond accordingly, adapting, changing, and creating. The physical learning space is always a contributing feature, but Jen opened an imaginary space for her students, fostering student surrender to process. And, it is to the extreme importance of these openings for imaging forth artistic thinking that I direct attention to today. It is not so much the artistic product, the art form that holds the significances. It is the power of the form to inform (Eisner). Eisner (1972) writes, “What is mediated through thought are qualities, what is managed in process are qualities, and what terminates at the end is a qualitative whole; an art form that expresses something by virtue of the way in which these qualities have been created and organized” (p. 114). The act of creation precipitates these qualities. Through adapting, building, changing, making meaning, artistic thinking is engaged in a constant organizing and reorganizing encounter. The qualities encountered, each of you have intimate knowledge of, as artists. These are the qualities you want your students to experience. For these are the qualities that keep artistry within art.

It is impossible to separate parts or qualities away from the entirety of the act of creating. It is experienced as connected, all parts linked in relation to the vital movement of the whole, belonging to the self and situation within this movement of thinking. In this way the act of creating positions participants to be wholly involved. I like to think of this as the problem of content, material, and form (borrowed from M.Bakhtin). Content is what the work is about. Materials are the concrete and abstract matters that figure into process. And, form is the directions my inquiry takes via the relationships among self, content, and materials. I will share with you a little about how I see myself working as an artist. And, as I do this, attend to the interdependency of content, materials, and form.

I understand artworks to be ideas negotiated through interacting with materials. The process is a constant interchange between self (the personal) and situation (the contextual). This necessitates participation and involvement. I confront boldly the artistic inquiry ahead of me with a willingness to engage in the imaginings of the making process. Artistic purpose is something to be worked towards, rather than something that is necessarily present at the beginning of the making process. Demands are made of me throughout the creating process—the perception, selection, and organization of qualities and responsiveness to them. Lines, shapes, hues, and textures are combined as I play with balance, proportion, emphasis, movement, and rhythm. These relationships reorganize my work in an ongoing dialogue. At times, this is a tactile dialogue. My body frequently knows more than my mind can explain. In fact, I often become aware

of a technique or approach as an intuitive bodily knowing first. At times, the dialogue is visual. I respond to what is happening before my eyes. At times, the dialogue is emotional. I have a moment in mind I desire to reinvent. These dialogues are interconnected and indivisible. Feeling and thinking, the head and the hand, the mind and the body, the private and public, seeing and acting, non-verbal and verbal, are all interactive and interconnecting relations that are alive and vital within my artistic experience.

Artistic experiences hold tremendous possibilities for teaching/learning of all kinds. It is an experience that values personal knowings, interpretations, and expressions; and experience that involves constructing meaning for oneself; an experience that relies on dialogue and participation as a means to this sense-making; an experience that has to be felt and lived through as a whole. In so doing I become absorbed in relations that could never be reduced to rule. Rather, judgments are made on an ongoing basis. Always searching for a rightness of fit. The act of creating positions me in between the content of artwork, the materials being worked with, and the form it takes. And, it is within this in-between position that at some point the materials become a medium, precipitated through the act of creating. John Dewey calls this “sensitivity to a medium as a medium”. A movement of thinking ensues; it is a moving force; it holds a spirit that I must attend to. The situation and/or materials talk back, and I respond to the back talk (Schon).

Some examples of students' words reflecting such cognizance and aliveness:

Student A: Some of my best works are accidents. I remember working so hard on a lump of clay. The other clay got thrown into a clump. And, then I looked at the discarded clay and it looked far more interesting, so it became my form.

Student B: I had a plan and I was methodically trying to work it out in plaster. And, all of a sudden I realize it is not going to work. I started to notice the nice marks my tool was making in the plaster. They were not marks I was deliberately trying to make. They were beautiful marks in the surface and I said to the teacher, "Is this what you mean by sincere marks?" And she said, "Yes, those are honest marks". I decide to leave them.

Student C: Artistic Advice: Find out what the material is capable of...it is important to experiment, to find out what the material will do before commitment...be sensitive to what the material will do. You tried doing something to it and it said no. You can persuade something sometimes. You have to be sensitive to the materials you use, otherwise you are abusing them.

Experimentation, observation, intuitive knowing, mistakes as a route to learning, are all revealed as a part of process. The qualities of attentiveness, personal involvement, emotional commitment, felt freedom, dialogue and interaction, inquiry-guided, projection, and self consciousness, appear, disappear and reappear, in my voice and the students' voices.

What do these qualities offer?

Attentiveness offers close observation and gives students time to dwell with and in situations, student and teacher attentiveness is a willingness to be receptive to sensory qualities and relations, perceiving possibilities. To learn to see with potential in materials, in ideas, and in people is a lost form of seeing.

Personal Involvement respects and encourages divergent ways of approaching learning. Knowledge grows from and is a reflection of lived experience. Students see and experience that there are multiple ways to know the world.

Emotional Commitment reveals that learning is discovery. But, the discovery is neither an object or a concept, but a feeling or attitude that engages participation.

Felt Freedom insists learning spaces must allow for liberties in the ways we choose to engage, contributing to a spirit of inquiry. It seems learning needs space and freedom to wonder, question, reconsider, making room for the creation or invention of meaning.

Dialogue and Interaction draw students into the depth and complexity of subject matter. These dialogues become the link to sense making. Thoughts are actively shaped by the process of thought itself. In this way, thought not only shapes outcomes, it is constitutive of them.

Inquiry Guided Learning is a venture. It demands alertness. The organization emerges for the negotiation of materials and relations. It is always in the making. As such it requires questioning, openness to possibilities, attentive listening and responding. It is a dialogue of faith, a search process that is inquiry-guided. The process determines the form or manner of representation as it evolves for each student. This form is fluid-ever changing.

Projection allows for ideas to emerge. New possibilities are encouraged to be included during process. Play or negotiation can posit alternative possibilities and encourage imaginative thought, requiring speculation and projection.

Greater Self-consciousness/awareness or wider/deeper self

understandings are gained through attending to other(s); other materials, other ideas, other images; other texts. Empathetic understandings are fostered.

Relations between self and other are continually addressed through the space negotiated among content, material, and form.

But, much of educational rhetoric today seeks to make learning experiences common amongst all learners. This often leads to a reduction of personal identity in favor of collective sameness.

The arts offer practices that are inherently relational. Philosophers for centuries have turned to the arts as exemplary forms of such ontological reciprocity—the

negotiation of self-other relations. It is within this room or space that learning takes place. It is a vulnerable space, risk and uncertainty abound, but also pleasure and found purpose. It can be uncomfortable, disturbing, difficult, but also wonderful. Dewey describes a lostness and fondness of self. A confidence in process is required.

Some recent talk in art education and education generally, tends to cast art and all learning as representations, manifested through applied methods and pre determined assessments. The opportunities for our students to compose, to see, to experience the qualitative relationships that emerge and to make judgments about them are curtailed. When you mandate preconceived decision making on art, ends are conceptualized and the means to the end becomes entirely mapped out in advance. But, in art making one surrenders to what the work in process suggests. There are shifting aims, emergent features and qualities. Content and form are inextricably linked, inseparable. There are relationships between thinking and the materials the artist utilizes. To create, entails thinking within the constraints and affordances of the materials being used. (Eisner). We learn to pay attention to what is given as the place to begin. To respond to what the materials suggest and reveal. This artistic thinking is what education ought to entail.

I think it is an urgent necessity for our students and for our future. The act of art making teaches us to attend to process, to have confidence in process, to

imagine the world otherwise. The more we feel the pressure to standardize, the more we need to remind ourselves of what we should not try to standardize (Eisner). Art Rooms need to make room for tasks that position/invite students to participate wholly as creators with assessment as the individual and collective accompaniment on an ongoing basis. Discovery and invention yield artistry, bringing forth tangible forms. There is little room for exploring artistry where rigid rules dictate the way in which art should be represented. Limitations unduly impinge or restrict the possibilities for artistry. Artistry comes from playing with possibilities, searching for relationships. The development of such thinking in situation allows for the discovery of potential. It permits possibilities to be included as the search evolves. Without an artful, playful spirit, it would seem that imaginative thought, requiring speculation and conjecturing about possibilities, might not be possible. So as educators find themselves caught up in the immediacy of given situations, they are confronted with either contriving artistic encounters to fit a fixed idea or acting on an openness to new ideas and an acceptance of alternatives through listening and responding to the particularities of contexts. Belief in the worthiness of the latter approach as art translates into greater commitment to search for these considerations in their art teaching practices. Remind yourself of the artist within. Awaken the artist within each of your students.

One caveat: I am not advocating for an abandonment of artistic technique, skill, aesthetic appreciation, and critique. The teacher/artist in all forms of learning

needs to approach curricular materials like art materials. The teacher/artist is a curriculum maker working with techniques, skills, exercises in appreciation and critique. Rather than focusing on the external attributes of these materials, the focus of curriculum making becomes the process of traversing, through dialoguing and negotiating, interactions between self, others, and curriculum materials. Teachers need to ask how can curriculum materials become mediums for learning? How can they incite dialogue, negotiation, and interaction?

Bottom Line:

There is art within education and education within art (Dewey). But, it depends on keeping room for artistry.