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Emma's Trouble with Mr. Robson's Teaching

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Some time ago, I collected data for a study on students' experiences of preparation for assessment of their art portfolios at the high school level in Canada, England and The Netherlands (Blaikie, Schonau and Steers, 2003, 2004). Participants with whom I had conversations in Canada described varied but mostly rewarding experiences. They valued their art learning, and in particular, found portfolio assessment an important part of the process of producing a focused collection of their own art work, learning about related art concepts, and becoming acculturated within Dewey's (1934) conception of constructive criticism as the reeducation of perception. However, one student's description of her experiences was quite different. Emma¹ described years fraught with frustration as a high school art student. She emerged from grade twelve having learnt very little that was not self taught. Emma's teacher Mr. Robson had not taught theoretical concepts or practices in the visual arts, nor did he assist her preparations for the portfolio review process at the universities she applied to for admission. In spite of this, she applied to

¹The names Emma and Mr. Robson are pseudonyms.

university and college fine art programs with excellent reputations, and she was accepted into the program of her choice. However, preparing to apply to Bachelor of Fine Art Programs was significantly more difficult than it should have been.

I was troubled by Emma's story and experiences, and about a year later I was able to contact her. She agreed to become the focus of this study on her lived experiences of high school art. Ethical approval was granted by the Research Ethics Committee at Lakehead University.

Emma is not a wildly flamboyant bohemian artiste, nor does she fit the stereotype of a fine art student, in serious black or flowing hippy clothes with adventurous hair. She is shy, serious, and quietly spoken. Dressed in an oversized donkey coloured wool sweater, jeans, and sneakers, with long hair framing her face, she and I sat down together over coffee and engaged in a phenomenologically oriented conversation (Mischler, 1986, van Manen, 1997), which focused on the central question I posed to her: *What was your lived experience of being a high school art student?* I wanted to find out how this experience impacted Emma not just in terms of her own particular lived experiences as a young artist, but also with regard to what was presented to her as art knowledge, and how this challenged and troubled her. I was also interested in the feelings she experienced during and after her high school art experience.

Whatever an art educator holds to be most valuable epistemologically, my assumption was and is that art content of a particular orientation is present when one teaches art at the high school level. Of course this content could be design and craft based, fine art studio based, oriented towards a social justice approach in which art making and learning includes examination of topics such as culture, gender, and race, for example; or an aesthetic questioning approach wherein students examine issues such as "what is art?" All these varied approaches involve presenting art concepts, elements and principles of design, theories and practices, teaching about them, and facilitating engagement as well as visual and text based responses. Significantly, in my search of the literature

for this study, I found no research that focuses on the effects of poor art teaching, or on art teachers who do not teach focused art content and skills. What abounds in the literature are discussions based on the aforementioned assumptions, namely, the contested theories, concepts, and studio practices art educators believe should be taught at the high school level, as well as discourse about how art should be taught. As a consequence, what art educators believe ought to be taught underlines a consensual belief that there does need to be a focus on art content, whatever that might be, via theories, concepts, and studio practices.

The Literature

Approaches to art content and curricula

As a direct result of strained Soviet United States relations and the space race culminating in Sputnik in 1959, in the early 1960's there was a call for massive educational reforms in schools in the United States. The politically motivated call for greater rigour in school curricula had a profound effect on curriculum theory world wide, displacing the Deweyan inspired Progressive movement focusing on the whole child which had gained momentum in the 1930s, and replacing it with the need to teach based on the epistemological structures of specific subjects of study, also known as the structure of the disciplines approach (Schwab, 1964). As a direct consequence, in 1963 an entire issue of *Studies in Art Education* focused on whether there exists a discipline of art education (Clark, 1991). Two decades later, in the 1980s, conceptualizations of approaches to art teaching include Greer's (1984) discipline based art education; child and studio focused approaches (Michael, 1980), and Chalmers' (1981) paradigm for multicultural art education as ethnology.

Clark (1994) notes that while the child-centered approach peaked in the 1940s, today the literature features discipline and social justice approaches. Social justice is prevalent particularly in postmodern conceptions of art education as defined by social construct, context, gender, and culture (Dalton, 2001). Currently, challenges to disciplinary boundaries in art education (Dalton, 2001) buttress the notion that what we

have here is a discipline, albeit with blurred edges. There is sufficient literature in our field to succumb to Schwab's (1964) definition of a discipline: It must be composed of discipline specific theoretical content and structure; there must be a community of scholars devoted to scholarly work in the discipline, as well as quite distinctive methods of inquiry.

The notion of art as a subject of serious study in the high school where teachers take their students on a research journey acquiring knowledge about art and developing critical acumen about their own studio work and the art of others has existed for years in international art curricula, such as Advanced Placement (2008) and the International Baccalaureate Diploma Program (2001). At the time of rewriting (Winter 2008) similar approaches can be seen in national art education curricula in other countries such as in Britain (at <http://www.curriculumonline.gov.uk>) where assessment of learning is carried out on a national scale (<http://www.qca.org.uk> provides links to assessment of students' learning in art and design in Britain). Similarly, the national curriculum in art in Australia can be viewed at <http://www.australia.gov.au/curriculum> and links there take one to strategies for national assessment of student learning in art. National curricula and related assessment approaches have been examined by art education scholars Doug Boughton (1994), John Steers (1994) and Diederik Schonau (1994) in Australia, the United Kingdom and The Netherlands respectively, as well as international comparative studies conducted by Blaikie, Schonau and Steers (2003, 2004).

At the time of writing, publication of a new curriculum guide in Ontario is imminent. However, at the time of data collection, Emma's teacher would have been required to reference the *Ontario Curriculum: The Arts, Grades 11 and 12* (2000) wherein three strands of study are identified: Theory, Analysis, and Creation. Art history and theories about art are incorporated in the curriculum strand titled Theory. In the curriculum component called Analysis, students engage in art criticism and aesthetics, which involve reflecting on, analyzing and interpreting art. Art production dominates in the curriculum strand titled Creation. These components are very common in cur-

riculum guides and texts across Canada (Blaikie, 1997, 2003, Clark, 1994) and in the literature throughout North America and beyond.

Unlike the national and international curricula referred to, the way in which the *Ontario Curriculum: The Arts Grades 11 and 12* (2000) is implemented is open to interpretation by the teacher. As well, in all cases, the teacher's style of teaching impacts the delivery of any curriculum.

Styles of Teaching Art

In an earlier publication (Blaikie, 2003) I examined six art teachers' teaching styles. The majority fall into two categories: *responsive* and *negotiated* (Addison and Burgess (2000)). In the *responsive* style the teacher directs learning. Students are active participants, who respond to teacher defined art knowledge and values about art. Art learning is activity based. Students work to defined standards, based on easy to identify expectations and related assessment criteria. In the *negotiated* style students are viewed as competent, responsible, and empowered. Teachers facilitate their students' journeys and foci in art learning. Although expectations for art learning and assessment are defined mostly by teachers, in this approach the outcomes of assessment sometimes are negotiated. In the *open* method of teaching the teacher provides minimal or no direction. Addison and Burgess caution that this approach is viewed as best for highly motivated independent senior students where art as a subject of study is not boundaryed but cross referenced and integrated with others. The teacher does not articulate clearly defined expectations for art learning and no concrete body of knowledge is disseminated. In the *open* approach it is challenging for students to work purposefully toward specific goals unless they are able to define goals for themselves. Assessment is carried out, usually without transparently articulated expectations for learning, and therefore without transparent criteria for assessment. According to Addison and Burgess, art assessment in the *open* approach can be experienced by students as idiosyncratic and overly subjective. The *open* approach might be viewed more favourably in the context of graduate work, where the thesis supervisor facilitates guided one on one student learning.

The *Ontario Curriculum: The Arts, Grades 11 and 12* (2000) calls for art teachers to utilize a variety of methodologies for teaching art, including cooperative, independent, teacher directed and hands-on work. It is true that there is no single best way to teach or learn art. The smorgasbord of styles and curricular approaches described can be implemented in a variety of specific contexts. However, my bias is that the art teacher needs to define for him/herself a pedagogical purpose and objectives for teaching and student learning, as well as a sense of scope. Based on this conceptualization, Emma's art teacher Mr. Robson did not seem to have been teaching art as such.

Findings

I have analyzed the emergent transcript data into themes which are presented to you in chronological narrative order: Emma and the grade twelve art curriculum; Emma and grade twelve assessment; the school art style and implications for university admission; and reflections on Mr. Robson. The conversations are rich with Emma's own thoughts and feelings. As much as possible, I have left these intact to retain Emma's voice as she describes her lived experiences.

Emma and the grade twelve art curriculum

In Emma's high school art program, her belief is that Mr. Robson did not prepare formal art lessons, and consequently had no concrete expectations of his students with regard to learning in art. Emma describes herself as "an art person" who very much wanted to learn art:

E: Okay in my high school (art) program...we did not do very much. There was nothing in the way of planning, lesson plans...an average day was just coming in and he would give you a photocopy to draw from...a photo or a magazine or sometimes you know...Louis Carroll, one of those illustrations from Alice in Wonderland, something like that.

F: And you would have to copy the illustration?

E: Yeah, pretty much and so some people wouldn't and

then he would put a movie on...

F: Why wouldn't they do it?

E: Just because there was no real sort of...they didn't have to...he didn't seem to be (keeping) track of things and it wasn't like you know usually, when you are in a class you sort of have an idea of how you are doing because you are handing things in...There were people who wanted to learn and people who didn't...he sort of let people do whatever they wanted to.

F: So, he wouldn't come in and say...today we are going to look at colour theory.

E: Oh, no, never.

F: So what theory did you learn?

E: Well that's the thing; we didn't have (art) history, no sort of theory.

According to Emma, one-off projects were started and then "forgotten about". Emma states: "Sometimes he'd bring in daffodils and we'd draw the daffodils and people would whine". If a student did not want to draw daffodils, for example, the student could do "pretty much, whatever you wanted." This included watching Hollywood movies, rather than educational or art related movies. I asked Emma if she could have been doing no art at all, and she said "oh yes". I asked how many in the class might be engaged in some art activity and Emma said "if there was a class of fifteen, maybe a couple were really sort of into it. Yeah, a lot of times were la la la (sing songy voice) and they would just sit there". "Does that make sense?" Emma asked sadly.

Emma and grade twelve assessment

In art assessment, Emma believes there was "no consequence for not doing any work" stating that assessment was based on the instructor's subjective opinion. She stated: "If he felt (a student) was trying really hard, then he'd give them a good mark. It didn't matter whether they were producing

good work". She told me about a boyfriend-girlfriend couple. Mr. Robson gave the girl almost the same mark as the boy, although Emma claims the female did not produce any studio work at all. Emma said that you got good marks "if he liked you". I asked if expectations were generated (and thereby related criteria for assessment), for example being expected to show evidence of understanding a concept, chiaroscuro for example, in a drawing. "No, no" said Emma, adding:

What I found really frustrating is--I remember because I've always been a good drawer, he would be like this person really stinks, but they tried really hard so they got a good mark and yet this person is a better drawer or produced better drawing. Because I mean art should be like math. (If I am not good at math and somebody else is, I shouldn't get an A for effort, you know? It is hard to say because a lot of the times his marks, it didn't seem fair, it didn't seem to be according to ability... maybe whether you showed up and looked busy or something like that, but it really didn't matter because I knew a lot of people who did nothing and still sort of would get decently high marks.

This interested me. First, the idea that "art should be like math," the idea that one should assess based on concrete evidence of products and process, not perceptions of effort and likeability. I wondered just how casual assessment was. I asked if Mr. Robson required art work to be handed in for assessment. Emma replied angrily "Yeah, every once in a while we'd hand something in and every once in a while he'd give us an assignment, like a homework assignment, like draw your shoes". The clichéd drawings of daffodils and shoes raise the issue of the school art style described by Efland (1976).

***The school art style: Implications
for university admission***

The school art style is still prevalent today in some art classrooms. It is characterized by copied popular imagery, high realism, cartoons and animé, and very sentimental imagery, for example the cutesy cat with enormous eyes. Emma paints a caricature of the school art style in her description of the lim-

ited scope of projects assigned: "Draw your shoes, draw your back porch, a lot of times, people just drew from magazines... they copied". Copying can be useful as an exercise. I asked "Would you copy from a painting?" "No, out of a magazine" she replied. With regard to exploration of cultures, genres, social issues, history and styles in studio art it appears absolutely nothing of the like took place in Mr. Robson's classroom. In fact, the curricular components Theory, Analysis and Creation in the *Ontario Curriculum: The Arts, Grades 11 and 12 (2000)* were not taught at all. In the laissez-faire studio work carried out, Emma contends that "really high realism was probably the ideal". However, the universities she applied to expected to see a range of subjects, styles, and media exploration in her studio portfolio, including a lot of experimental and conceptual work. With Mr. Robson as her high school art teacher, this proved problematic for Emma, who had to work hard on her own to produce portfolios for admission to university, and in so doing, try to ascertain the agenda of the institutions to which she was applying as she and her classmates had not been required to put together portfolios either as a process based experience or for assessment purposes. What made the situation more problematic was that Mr. Robson took all the art work produced, especially art pieces that he liked, and kept them for himself:

He kept them all and that's really hard for people I know who were trying to go to university and stuff. That was sad because I don't know where he put any of our stuff. If I did something, if I produced something that was, you know, very good, I would make sure that I got it back and I guess that he would usually put it on the wall and then I would just sort of take it.

Without any assistance from Mr. Robson, Emma put together her own portfolio for admission to university level fine art programs stating:

I took the odd drawing that I might have done in class but I did a lot of drawings by myself. I did stuff that you know, I had done in work shops (at the local city art gallery) and things like that, but I put it altogether myself. There was no one helping, so I think that's really sad because art is

just as important as any other program.

First year fine art

In answer to my question about her experiences of being a fine art student Emma replied “this is just what I want” sighing happily:

(It's) good because we had a lot of really, really, really good teachers first year. Well, we had “Larry”...He was really specific about what he wanted... he would come over and he'd show you if you didn't understand.

I asked Emma if she learnt lots of different techniques from Larry. Yes, she affirmed.

[They use] a range of materials. He set really high standards for people. Every day, every class you would have to hand in a drawing in this class and then he would assign homework as well. If you tried really hard on something and it didn't work, you'd still get not a perfect mark (sic)... (in design class) it was about the same because there were very specific assignments that we were doing and you know, if you don't hand something in, it definitely shows. Because it comes out in your mark...In high school, I sort of had the idea that if I really didn't do something, it really didn't matter because it didn't show up in your grades.

Emma explained that students might go through all of the steps in a woodcut design but, for example in colour registration if the design isn't “lined up properly, that's really important, so I'd probably get a worse mark than somebody whose design isn't as good. It has a lot to do with skill and technical stuff.”

Reflecting on Mr. Robson

At best, Emma believes Mr. Robson was trying to motivate his students:

It didn't seem like it had anything to do with technical sort of stuff (in art). He'd come in and have some big sort of life lesson, a story to tell us... I think that it overshadowed a lot of what we should have been doing. I

would have been perfectly content having assignments, finishing things. Ah, I mean when I did take art from (another teacher)...Our teacher (Mr. Robson) was sick and another one came and filled in, she gave us assignments and things like that. But I think that people were so used to doing nothing that it was a slap in the face. It was a shock because we were expected to do things now. With Mr. Robson I could have been like...I want to do this pointillism drawing the entire year and just do that. There just was no one to say okay we're going to do this assignment this day and this assignment this day. There was no direction...and they had a kiln at the school. It used to frustrate me because I really really wanted to try ceramics. The first year I was there, I remember it being fired up you know. I don't know. Maybe he is just lazy? It was just sort of day to day. And every once in a while he came in and he'd go on a tangent...he'd tell us some story... If he did have something that he wanted to talk about then you know, you would just have to sit there and listen.

Discussion

The idea that the art teacher is the curriculum (Blaikie, 2003, Gray and MacGregor, 1987) applies to this study, where the quality of individual art teaching is down to the individual teacher. There is no evidence to suggest that Mr. Robson adopted a particular curriculum orientation, including the discipline based, studio centred or social justice approaches referred to earlier, or that he taught art based on the three integrated components in the provincial curriculum guide, Analysis, Theory and Creation. For reasons I do not know or understand, it seems apparent that Mr. Robson abandoned his professional and artistic responsibilities as a teacher of art.

I suspect Emma is just one of many young students who has suffered the consequences of situations like this: Learning little or nothing results in resentment, sadness, anger, and frustration at being cheated out of a life-giving artistically and epistemologically grounded high school art education experience. As Emma states, "I feel really sad because art is just as important as any other program". My concern relates to how

and why this situation continued for four years at an Ontario high school? In Canada, provincial and territorial Ministries of Education create curricula which are implemented via school board superintendents and their staff who supervise school board appointed school principals who in turn oversee the work of teachers. In Ontario, teachers belong to necessarily protective unions, and they are also licensed by and responsible to the professional accreditation body, the Ontario College of Teachers. Mr. Robson was close to retirement. He had been teaching for decades. Although evaluations of his teaching might have been carried out periodically, for Emma's four years of high school art his teaching practice remained unchanged. Instead, students enjoyed what Emma describes as a "free credit" where students learnt nothing and high marks were given freely and without meaning. Emma's parents complained to the school principal. Perhaps other parents and students complained from time to time, but too few to effect change. Indeed, as Emma remarked scornfully, few students would complain to their parents or the principal for being given a "free credit". Yet, in a parallel situation, I doubt school administrators and parents would allow grade twelve math students to watch movies and do as they please for the entire grade twelve year while simultaneously hoping to gain acceptance into university programs in math and cognate disciplines. The implications for entry to further study would be serious and very damaging. Chapman's (1982) powerful description of public beliefs and myths about art and art education contextualizes and explains why art education is de-valued in a number of schools. For example, there exists the idea that children are naturally imaginative and creative and don't need to be taught art (p.29). We do not have the same view for example of mathematics. The idea that art is a talent suggests that it is a subject that one knows intuitively: A talent cannot be taught or learnt (p.29). The idea that art is play, fun, enjoyable, and entertaining de-values its importance pedagogically. Entertainment and fun do not have to be taught and play does not involve careful focused study (p.29). The idea that art is therapy suggests that art is for troubled children, and that its value lies in healing, not learning (p.29). These myths contribute to public beliefs about art

and art education, and to the sort of experience Emma had with Mr. Robson.

In *The Arts and the Creation of Mind* Eisner (2002) argues that in order to achieve the "wide variety of ends" (p.233) that an art education affords, art does have to be taught. For most people, artistic knowing and development does not occur as a natural consequence of growth, without formal instruction:

[If] artistic development were an automatic consequence of maturation, there would be no need for teachers of art, or music, or mathematics, or any other field in which artistic forms of activity are possible. Indeed, I would argue that an unassisted course of maturation is morally irresponsible; the teacher's task is to design environments that promote the educational development of the young. These environments include creating curricula, as well as engaging in the artistic use of one's self as a teacher. (p.234)

At this point, you may well ask, so what? What can be done, if anything? Of course this goes beyond being an artistic and pedagogical issue, it is political. It is about how as a society in Canada we value the arts, and how important we deem them to be in schools. This is an ongoing conversation. With the assistance of the editor of the *Canadian Review of Art Education*, I obtained permission from the reviewers of this manuscript to quote what they had to say about these matters.

Dr David Pariser conceptualizes the problem more generically. He states that the problem with Mr. Robson "has less to do with art education and more to do with basic problems of training and sustained dedicated and energized teachers who take professional pride in their work." He continues:

You ask, how could this teacher have totally abdicated his role as a teacher? The answer seems obvious, somewhere along the line he lost his vocation, found no support among his fellow teachers and was clearly not monitored at all for the quality of his teaching. It is true, that had he been teaching math or science, his atrocious approach to teaching would have been discovered ear-

lier and there would have been parental complaints, and administration would have followed quickly....I would suggest that you make it clear that the problem you describe is not specific to art teachers only, and that there are structural reasons why many teachers descend to the sorry state you describe.

David Pariser's point is well taken, there would likely have been some action taken if Mr. Robson had been teaching grade twelve math. The question is, is this a problem of unprofessionalism that is endemic and generic, or is it more common in art education classrooms than others? I had conceived of it as the latter, but perhaps I am mistaken.

At the conclusion to the original manuscript sent for review I noted that Mr. Robson seemed to have adopted Addison and Burgess's (2000) notion of the *open* style of teaching. I concluded by quoting Efland (1976): "We have been trying to change school art when we should have been trying to change the school!" (p .43). In response to this point, reviewer Dr Robert Dalton stated:

Does this let Mr. Robson off the hook? Are we left with no other strategies than diffused political action to raise public awareness of the importance of art education? Where is the responsibility of the union to uphold professional standards, of the Ministry to make sure teachers receive in-service workshops and of the School Board to investigate complaints?...It seems generous to refer to such laissez-faire behavior as a "teaching style"....Mr. Robson's actions are neither teaching nor style...The story ends with little cause for hope. I would like to see some recommendations that summon all stakeholders to ensure that this doesn't continue...we need to work at all levels to improve the quality of art education and to ensure that the Mr. Robsons out there are improved or removed.

In presenting this paper at recent conferences, prolonged animated discussions confirmed that there have existed many Emmas and Mr. Robsons. In response to Drs Pariser and Dalton, my sense of the scope of this problem is that it has

to be addressed at macro and micro levels—probably with greater success at the latter. The problem relates to teacher professionalism and broader societal views on art education. Going beyond to the macro level in Canada, numerous provincial and territorial curricula are produced and require implementation enforceable by school boards and their appointed principals in schools. These are numerous levels of governance, more than in a system that is centralized pedagogically and politically via one national curriculum in art and design, which is implemented by local school authorities who oversee external assessment. In relation to Mr. Robson's style of teaching, when preparing students for national curriculum assessment that is accompanied by external examination (or the synonyms moderation or outside readership), the teaching style cannot be *open* as Addison and Burgess (2000) envision it or *laissez-faire* as Mr. Robson approached teaching, but rather, necessarily, *responsive* or *negotiated*. In other words, the teacher has to set a curriculum agenda for teaching and learning. This can be done with students in a negotiated way. But the teacher cannot have students chatting and watching movies, simply because curriculum material cannot be covered this way.

In Canada, a centralized policy on teacher professionalism such as a national art curriculum might be effective, but it would be challenging to create as there are so many stakeholders with various and competing agendas. I doubt the creation of a national curriculum in art in Canada could be accommodated because the provinces and territories enjoy the privilege of determining their own political agendas in relation to education as a whole. However, at the micro level, art teachers, students and parents are stakeholders who have the right and responsibility to assert the importance and value of art education. Those of us involved in teacher education have a similar responsibility. This study names a problem I have not seen addressed in this way in the literature thus far. As a community of art education scholars and practitioners who have a right to a voice at all levels, the rest is up to us.

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