

NOTES FROM THE FIELD

Changing Things as They Are: Promoting Social Justice Through Encounters with the Arts

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The Case for the Arts in Schools

Zach walks into my office, drops his knapsack and falls wearily into the chair across from my desk. He is in his third year as a high school English teacher, and his final semester of the Masters Degree program in English Education of which I am faculty adviser. “The data is suffocating me;” he says first, and then follows up with “this is the only thing keeping me sane.” The “this” Zach is referring to is his Masters thesis in progress, which is an examination of his efforts to employ an aesthetic approach to teaching the novel *To Kill a Mockingbird* (Lee, 1960). “The data,” on the other hand, refers to reams of statistical breakdowns of students’ standardized test scores, intended to inform instruction through detailed analysis of student errors. For Zach and many of his colleagues, the use of numerical data derived from tests to shape and drive instruction is misguided in its failure to take into account the rich qualitative information that becomes available when students are given time and guidance to craft authentic aesthetic responses to the arts. For Elliot Eisner (2002): “Narratives, film, video, theater, even poems and collages can be used to deepen one’s understanding of aspects of educational practices and its consequences” (p. 210).

Beyond having value as an assessment tool, engagement with the arts in the K-12 classroom can offer aesthetic experiences that have the potential to transform the way students encounter the world, engaging the imagination in acts of perception that stir them to “wide-awakeness” (Greene, 1978, p. 2).

At a time when so much attention is given to quantitative data in K-12 schools, there are countervailing forces

that argue that interacting with the arts in a deep and sustained way actually expands the definition of literacy by introducing new epistemologies informed by aesthetic encounters with the visual, performing and literary arts, as well as new media (Kist, 2005). Advocates for the arts in education call for a variety of types of arts programs, some whose aim is to teach mastery of a specific art form and others whose chief mode of interaction with the arts encourages children to “acquire from their consideration of works of art unique skills of analytic thinking and familiarity with a wealth of aesthetic texts” (Davis, 2008, p. 20). This latter type of arts program, called aesthetic education, seeks to awaken us to the possibilities contained in works of art (Greene, 2001). Following is a vignette shared by Jeanette Del Valle, a high school English Teacher at the School for Community Research and Learning in the Bronx, New York. She writes about the importance of her students’ involvement in an aesthetic education program offered at her school by Lincoln Center Institute:

One of the most important functions I serve is making the arts accessible to my students. More often than not, they view the arts as an indulgence of the ‘rich and White.’ Convincing them that the fine arts are for everyone is sometimes a hard sell, which is why their work in aesthetic education is so critical. Not only do we expose them to the arts, they get to spend time discussing, thinking about, and actually making art. By the end of the experience, a whole new world has been opened to them. (Email communication, Oct. 2008)

Jeanette received her Masters degree in English Education from a university which has a long-standing relationship

with Lincoln Center Institute (LCI). Through this relationship, participating faculty immerse teacher candidates in aesthetic experiences with a variety of art forms. As they encounter visual art, theater, music and dance, they also explore the theoretical underpinnings of this work. For many of these teacher candidates, this may be the first time they themselves have visited a museum or seen a live performance. If we agree with Eisner that “many of the most complex and subtle forms of thinking take place when students have an opportunity either to work meaningfully on the creation of images—whether visual, choreographic, musical, literary, or poetic—or to scrutinize them appreciatively” (2002, pp. xi-xii), then surely we must expect teachers to have knowledge and skills that will allow them to facilitate these experiences. However, school systems often regard arts programs with a kind of ambivalence. Few administrators would actually say that they do not value the arts, but during tight budgetary times they are the first to go. Davis (2008) quotes a school committee member:

Our students have so many demands on them from staying out of trouble to gaining the skills to be successful in the adult world. The important subjects in preparing students for such responsibility are reading, science and math (p. 25)

Aside from the fact that such comments ignore the many ways in which learning in the arts often incorporates skills such as reading, science and math, the chief objection against their inclusion in the K-12 curriculum is that they are expensive in terms of time, resources, and money. Perhaps administrators are uncomfortable with

the fact that the time spent making and interacting with works of art is synonymous to time taken away from the curriculum that gets reflected in standardized tests. Perhaps it is also a lack of comfort and familiarity that teachers and administrators themselves have with the arts. Teachers who insist that they do not dance or sing or write poetry tend to be excused much more readily than those who might limit their curriculum by claiming that they do not 'do math' (Davis, 2008). But why are so many teachers uncomfortable and unfamiliar with the arts? In all likelihood it is because they themselves are products of school systems that did not have strong arts programs.

Access to Arts Institutions as a Social Justice Issue

When I began teaching middle school students in the 1980's in the Bronx and later in East Harlem, New York, I was dismayed to discover that although my students lived in one of the cultural capitals of the world, a great number of them had had almost no exposure to the cultural institutions housed minutes away from their front doors. An informal survey of seventh-through ninth grade students revealed that not one of them had ever visited Lincoln Center or any other professional performing arts venue, although some had seen live performances by arts organizations that toured public schools. Only a few students had visited any of the city's art museums. Students who had visited a museum had done so only on school field trips, and among those who had, often it was during elementary school years. Once they entered middle school, virtually all cultural field trips had come to an end. There were few opportunities for students to interact with the performing and visual arts, particularly in settings outside of school. The lack of exposure to the arts became a self-perpetuating problem as students matured with the sense that art forms and genres were not a part of their world. Often, students responded to the challenging and unfamiliar aspects of music, art or literature by claiming that it was "boring." The "boring" response was one

that usually came about when students had no frame of reference for how to respond to the work of art. They had simply not learned how to see or hear what the work presented. This phenomenon was particularly noticeable, on field trips to art museums on the rare occasions that such trips were allowed. Without sufficient preparation to ground their experience and give them a frame of reference from which to view the art, students often wandered around the museum completely disengaged from their surroundings.

Even when the students were being placed in proximity to art, the world of art was really not open to them. Exposure to the performing and visual arts in schools was rare enough, but the deeper problem lay in the fact that little was done beyond the mere act of exposure. Entire cultural histories and milieus were opaque to them. In all likelihood this was due to a lack of experience, training or comfort on the part of their teachers. No time was spent on professional development to support teachers in ways that they might incorporate the arts into the curriculum, and no time was spent preparing the students to have meaningful encounters with the art they were about to see. As Dewey said:

Everyone knows that it requires apprenticeship to see through a microscope or telescope, and to see a landscape as a geologist sees it. The idea that esthetic perception is an affair for odd moments is one reason for the backwardness of the arts among us. The eye and the visual apparatus may be intact; the object may be physically there, the cathedral of Notre Dame, or Rembrandt's portrait of Hendrik Stoeffel. In some bald sense, the latter may be 'seen.' They may be looked at, possibly recognized, and have their correct names attached. But for lack of continuous interaction between the total organism and the objects, they are not perceived, certainly not esthetically (1980, pp. 53-54). The lack of continuous interaction was certainly part of the problem. Eisner (2002) has observed that the arts are either implicitly or explicitly treated as a frill in relation to the school curricu-

lum. In the traditional K-12 school art is a discrete subject that students partake in once a week, if at all. It is rare in public schools that students beyond elementary school will have experiences with more than one art form, say visual art and music, in any given semester. Grades in art classes often do not count toward graduation credits, and students are quite aware of this.

LCI Teacher Education Collaborative

Eisner (2002) raises another key issue, even when arts curricula are undertaken with the best of intentions; they usually fall short of helping students to become fully conversant with a broad range of art forms and genres. Early childhood and elementary education certification programs usually require at least one semester of training in the arts, but these requirements are not consistent across programs. Teachers in New York State seeking certification require no more than one semester of course work in "artistic expression" (New York State Education Department <http://eservices.nysed.gov/teach/certhelp/CertRequirementHelp.do>), which may include any form of art. With such inconsistent attention to the arts, it is no wonder that students have few opportunities for meaningful encounters with them. However, there are some arts organizations whose mission is to provide students with prolonged encounters with works of art. LCI (www.lcinstitute.org), has been in existence for over thirty years, and is known for its work in the field of arts with public school teachers and students, as well as with college professors and teacher candidates. Encompassing dance, theater, music, visual art, and architecture, LCI focuses on aesthetic education through imaginative learning, rather than focusing on arts education or art appreciation. According to LCI's founding Philosopher-in-Residence Maxine Greene (2001), aesthetic education requires that "the learner must break with the taken-for-granted, what some call the 'natural attitude,' and look through the lenses of various ways of knowing, seeing and feeling in a conscious endeavor to impose different orders upon experience." (p. 5).

LCI accomplishes this goal by bringing “students into the world of imaginative learning and a work of art through participatory activities that include art making, questioning, reflection, and contextual information and research” (Lincoln Center Institute, 2008, p. 4). A key part of this endeavor is the professional development of the teachers involved. This takes place in a variety of ways. Participating teachers usually attend a week-long summer intensive training which includes immersion in the study of several works of art as well as experiential workshops with teaching artists who are professionals in dance, theater, music or visual art. Some teachers and teacher candidates also participate in university-based courses that are taught with the participation of Lincoln Center Institute teaching artists. These courses, which are housed in education departments of colleges and universities, may be primarily focused on aesthetic education, or they may offer an aesthetic education component within the context of another course.

The courses in aesthetic education are designed to provide teachers and teacher candidates with encounters with works of art that are similar to those that their K-12 students would normally experience. According to LCI’s document *Entering the World of the Work of Art* (2008) which is used as a planning guide for teachers:

The Institute’s approach to arts and education initially brings students into the world of imaginative learning and a work of art through participatory activities that include art making, questioning, reflection, and contextual information and research. (p. 4)

The core assumption within the aesthetic education approach is that encounters with works of art will bring students into the world of imaginative learning. Learning in the arts goes far deeper than the capacity of being able to name and identify various forms and genres. It is about understanding the creative process, and the choices made in executing a work of art and experiencing a work of art through the senses and imagination.

Graduate Courses in Aesthetic Education

In my current role as a professor of English Education I teach graduate level courses in aesthetic education, as well as other graduate methods courses that incorporate inquiry into works of art in collaboration with LCI teaching artists. These courses are taken by a mix of preservice and inservice teachers. Some of the students in the class, such as Jeanette, work in schools that have a relationship with Lincoln Center Institute, and interestingly, may be studying the same works of art in their own classrooms. The majority of the students in these classes, however, do not work in schools with LCI teaching artists. They come with a broad range of experiences regarding arts. Some, just like their students, have never visited major museums or performing art venues and have had very limited encounters with the arts.

One of the primary goals of these courses is to help teachers find ways of bringing the performing and visual arts to their students; it is important to create an atmosphere in which teachers and teacher candidates can begin to feel comfortable experiencing and discussing a variety of art forms, even if they have had little experience up to that time. The skill and competence these teachers will need in order to introduce a work of art to their own students begins with creating an atmosphere that encourages open discussions that probe beneath the surface of initial responses. Such discussions can level the playing field between those who may have a somewhat substantial background in the arts and those who have little or none. This is because in an aesthetic education classroom, our discussions of a work of art are not based in expertise. One needs not to be able to identify a school of painting or type of dance, or even name the instruments of the orchestra to be able to enter into such a discussion. What is essential is a willingness for participants to be open to what is present in a work of art, to “lend works of art their lives” (Greene, 2001 p. 6).

The process by which we enter into these relationships with works of art

begins with what LCI calls “Noticing Deeply” (Holzer, 2007, p. 6). Repeated encounters with the same work of art are important for helping students achieve a sense of intimacy with the work. Through this process participants in an aesthetic education experience learn to articulate and support their responses to the work of art, thus moving them beyond first impressions. By engaging in these types of experiences, learners do gain a measure of authority through which they can have meaningful discussions about the work of art. Another key part of making the encounter with the work of art successful is to prepare students to open their minds to what the work contains. This is accomplished through careful preparation, spending time “Noticing Deeply” and brainstorming themes, noticing and identifying patterns, and making connections between this work of art and the world from which it emerged until one can begin to name and describe the processes the artist went through to create the work of art. This is a technique that LCI teaches by pairing teachers or professors with LCI teaching artists who are professionals in the particular art form being studied. Faculty meet with the teaching artist for a planning session in which they discuss the work of art (which have both already seen or heard and revisit during the session) and the context of the course in which they will be studying it. The conversation generally begins by collecting observations and ideas, and gradually narrowing of themes. These themes lead to the development of a “Line of Inquiry,” which LCI defines as: “an open, yet focused question that incorporates elements and concepts found in a specific work of art, and is related to the concerns of students and teachers” (p. 8).

Developing the experiential lessons based on the Line of Inquiry is a key element for preparing students to enter into an open discussion of a work of art framed by the concept of “Deeply Noticing” and describing. Another essential part of the planning session involves gathering contextual materials to support the study of the work of art.

After three consecutive semesters of working with LCI teaching artists

on creating these experiences around works of art in aesthetic education classes, I decided that it was time to begin to develop some “Lines of Inquiry” and experiential lessons on my own. After all, many of these students would not have the benefit of working with an LCI teaching artist in their own classrooms. If they were to be able to develop Lines of Inquiry and experiential lessons to prepare their own students for a meaningful encounter with a work of art, they would benefit from practicing this fairly complex set of skills in a supportive environment.

Independent Journeys into the Aesthetic

For our first encounter with a work of art, the class explored Picasso’s *Guernica*, by projecting the image on a blank white wall using an LCD projector. Click on this link to view an image of the painting: <http://arts.anu.edu.au/polsci/courses/pols1005/2007/Images/Picasso.Guernica2.jpg> We plunged directly into “Noticing Deeply” by describing the painting, and simultaneously, refraining from interpretations or judgments, pointing out details, asking questions, and commenting on specific techniques such as the use of black and white, the distortion of faces and the overlay of figures which many students felt lent the painting a sense of movement, violence and chaos. After nearly an hour of “Noticing Deeply,” I gave the students some contextual information, explaining that Picasso had painted *Guernica* in response to the horror of the bombing of the village of Guernica during the Spanish Civil War. The more details that the students learned about the context that led to the creation of the painting, they asked more questions, and wanted to go back and look at the painting again and again. We revisited *Guernica* three times over the course of the semester, with the students sketching, discussing, and finally planning and trying out lesson plans to explore its themes. This activity was based on a lesson originally developed with an eighth grade class in the Bronx. It was helpful to these teachers and teacher candidates to hear about the way in which students

who were similar to the ones they were currently teaching or would soon be teaching, might respond to lessons centered on the close study of a work of art.

After several semesters of repeating and refining the *Guernica* lesson, it was time to try a new work of art. Again, I wanted to focus on a painting that told a compelling story. Teachers working with LCI teaching artists have the opportunity to use theatrical, dance and musical performances from LCI’s repertory in addition to several of their traveling photography exhibits and paintings in the Metropolitan Museum of Art’s permanent collection. The point of these independently developed lessons was to model ways in which teachers could bring works of art into their classrooms at no cost and without having to leave their school buildings. Since more and more school administrators are discouraging field trips on the grounds that it takes time away from test preparation and other academic pursuits, this approach could help teachers navigate some potential obstacles to bringing art into their classrooms. For now, with access to the Internet and a laptop and LCD projector, students could have access to many of the greatest works of art in the world. While looking at a projected image is not the same as the original, and in fact considerations of scale, texture and dimensionality need to be taken into account when choosing a work of art to be viewed in anything other than its original form; being able to view an enlarged image in the classroom and revisit it repeatedly allows for an immersion in the aesthetic experience. The other advantage of working with visual art is that, unlike a performance, the work of art can be taken in all at once, whereas any performance is by its very nature ephemeral and therefore can only be described retrospectively. Being able to point to and describe an object allows learners to think about a work as it stands still.

Continuing the Adventure with Brueghel

The next work of art we explored was Pieter Brueghel the Elder’s *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus*. The

image is viewable on Web Museum (<http://www.ibiblio.org/wm/paint/auth/bruegel/icarus.jpg>). In this painting, which depicts a bucolic seaside village at work, the tragedy of Icarus is not immediately apparent. First the viewer takes in the red shirted ploughman, then the shepherd, leading the eye to the “expensive delicate ship” (Auden, 1939). Finally, next to the ship, we see a tiny pair of human legs flailing in the water. The lens for viewing and considering the painting was: “In *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus*, How does Brueghel use perspective and composition to place the narrative of Icarus and Daedalus in the context of a scene of contemporary daily life?”

In preparation for viewing the painting I asked the students to recall a time in their lives when they were undergoing an experience that transformed their lives, while people around them were unaware of what they were going through. I gave out paper, colored pencils and oil pastels and asked them to draw a representation of their experience, and then, to gather in small groups and share their drawing and the stories behind them. Then each group chose one story from which to create a tableau to represent the scene. After the students performed their tableaux and we discussed the fact that the world tends to move around us even when we may feel that it has stopped, it was time to view Brueghel’s painting.

Projecting the image on a screen, I asked students to describe what they saw in the painting. None of them had ever seen it before. Their observations followed the sequence described earlier, with the red shirted ploughman as the most prominent image. Some of these graduate students were so unfamiliar with the style of painting and the era from which it came that they had difficulty recognizing the ploughman as male, and had never seen terraced fields such as those that appear in the scene. After being told that the painting was done by Brueghel in the 1500’s, most of the students were better able to consider the painting in the context of other European Renaissance paintings they had seen before. We engaged in “Noticing Deeply” for quite some time, and then someone noticed the bare legs

sticking up out of the sea. “Someone is drowning!” the student said. There was speculation about whether the figure had fallen off the ship. Then it was time to reveal title of the painting and ask the class if anyone knew the story of Icarus and Daedalus. Several had never heard the story. After one a student gave a synopsis of the myth, everyone immediately realized that the legs belonged to Icarus. “What does it mean that the painting is called ‘Landscape with the Fall of Icarus,’ rather than, say, ‘Daedalus and Icarus?’” Several students picked up on the fact that it was not just what happened to the two main characters that was important; the landscape was just as essential to the story, just as it had been in the tableaux they had created. “The world just keeps on moving no matter what you are going through,” said one student. Through the students’ comments and writing it was clear that they understood that the story of Daedalus and Icarus was a vehicle for telling the larger story about the rest of the world being indifferent to private suffering.

At this point we read Auden’s poem “Musee des Beaux Arts” (1939) aloud several times and then looked for points of comparison with the painting. This passage in particular offered a poignant illustration of the indifference of those who surrounded the subject:

In Breughel’s Icarus, for instance:
 how everything turns away
 Quite leisurely from the disaster;
 the ploughman may
 Have heard the splash, the forsaken cry,
 But for him it was not an important failure

Next I asked the students to think about whose eyes we were witnessing the scene. The point of view from which we see the scene is that of a bird, or, more likely, poor Daedalus still airborne on his waxen wings, helplessly watching as his beloved son Icarus drowns. “It looks like we are seeing the scene from above,” a student said. I asked why Brueghel might have chosen that particular vantage point. There was a sharp intake of breath as one student said: “It must be Daedalus. He sees what is happening and there’s nothing he can do.”

For homework students read Ovid’s poem from *Metamorphoses* and they chose a moment in the poem to which they could write their own responses. Following is one student’s response to the moment of transformation Brueghel captures from Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* as he refers to “the unlucky father, not a father” (line 360).

The Unlucky Father, Not a Father

I have lost the self that mattered.
 If I am not father then who am I?
 Broken, I grasp the awful reality as
 one by one the feathers fall
 and along with them, my spirit.

Writing their own poems in response to Ovid brought the experience to full circle, as it allowed students to make connections with passages that resonated for them. Another student chose the line “Fly midway. Gaze not at the boundless sky” (line 322) as a point of departure for his poem that considers the story of Icarus as an extended metaphor on an adolescent’s quest for autonomy:

Fly midway, Gaze not at the boundless sky
 Sacrifice truth, purity, and gold
 Submit to. Abide. Live and die
 With rules and tradition, I’ve been told
 Not ever, I say, I would rather die!
 Then listen or resign to the midway fly
 Oh my spirit will soar, because
 today I will try
 And no longer just gaze at the
 boundless sky

Over the next several weeks we revisited Ovid’s long poem along with several other excerpts from the *Metamorphoses* to which students responded by writing their own poems, drawing, and dramatic interpretation in addition to the more traditional discussions and analytical writing. This led to several other iterations of the practice of “Noticing Deeply.” Among them was an activity in which we used double entry journals, or what Anne Berthoff (1988) refers to as a “dialectical notebook.” This is a method of note taking in which the page is divided in two, with the left side consisting of quotes from the text being read and the right side is used for comments, questions and a variety of notes and responses

intended to help explicate the text for the reader’s own purposes. In this case, though, the ‘text’ was an apple that each student chose from a large wooden basket. In the left hand column, students took notes on what they could perceive about the apple by using their senses. In the right hand column they wrote about memories or associations regarding apples. This was to be used as raw material for writing poems and personal narratives. These experiences were accompanied by readings that explore the notions of observation, reflection and interpretation.

These graduate students took up this question with their responses and some of them took it up again in their own classrooms as they began bringing activities like these into their classrooms. One student, a middle school teacher told our class that every year she has her students read “How to Eat a Guava,” the opening story from Esmeralda Santiago’s memoir *When I was Puerto Rican* (1993). Before sharing our classroom experiences regarding Brueghel and then with apples, she had students read the story, and afterwards, showed them a guava. Now, she crafted her lesson around the students’ experiences, asking them to describe and write about a food that reminded them of home, family and heritage. Then she brought in several guavas for the class to share, and as they ate the guavas, they were able to: “hear the skin, meat and seeds crunching inside your head, while the inside of your mouth explodes in little spurts of sour” (Santiago, 1993, p. 4) She then had her students write similarly descriptive pieces about foods that reminded them of home and family. For the students who were already teaching, the work of “Noticing Deeply” was beginning to take hold in their practices, and the range of ways in which they were beginning to consider using art in their classrooms was increasing. Both teachers and teacher candidates were developing a level of comfort that made them willing to incorporate art in their work with middle and high school students in ways that they had not previously considered.

Midway through the semester the students wrote reflection papers on their experiences with “Noticing Deep-

ly.” One student who is a middle school English teacher recalled our work with Brueghel’s painting in this way:

Holzer’s distinction of students learning through continuous interaction with a piece of art over time really cements my first major breakthrough in academic instruction. In class, I was thankful for a model of this ‘continuous interaction’ through our interactions with art concerning Daedalus and Icarus. The chronology was entirely different than anything I’ve tried as a teacher. We interacted with the Brueghel painting and the Auden poem before we even read the actual text of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*. This is precisely the kind of buildup that allows context to play a role in shaping the comprehension and involvement of students.

As our campus continues to develop its long standing relationship with LCI, various faculty members are engaging in inquiries into aesthetic education

and its relationships to teacher education. A colleague who teaches courses that incorporate aesthetic education to graduate students in the literacy for K-12 program and I have begun to gather data to explore the extent to which the work we have done with these students in our graduate classes has had an impact in their teaching practices. Preliminary findings of this study suggest that while 100 percent of the respondents felt that art is an important and valuable part of all students’ education, more than sixty percent said they felt too much pressure from administrators to prepare students for standardized tests, and too little support to take students on trips or spend significant amounts of time studying art in their classrooms. Still, most reported that they find ways to bring music, paintings, photography and film into their classrooms. When there is an opportunity to visit a museum or take their students to see a theater or dance performance, they grab it. They work with

their students to study poems and stories more slowly, savoring the language just like Santiago did with the guava. For every work of art that teachers bring to their students, they give the students another piece of the world.

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