

International Journal of Education & the Arts

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<http://www.ijea.org/>

ISSN: 1529-8094

Volume 14 Memorial 1

August 19, 2013

In Memory of Susan Noffke

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Citation: Bresler, L., Andrews, K., Chen, W-R., Cronenberg, S., Harris, H., Houmann, A., Matsunobu, K., Murray-Tiedge, D., Nichols, J., & Smith, T. (2013). In memory of Susan Noffke. *International Journal of Education & the Arts*, 14(Memorial 1). Retrieved [date] from <http://www.ijea.org/v14m1/>.

Introduction

Difficult to grasp that Sue is no longer with us.

I met Sue in a conference that Ivor Goodson had organized in London, Ontario, sometime around 1990. It was a good gathering of people, including Andy Hargreaves, David Labaree, and Sue Noffke. A year later, we continued the conversation at an Action Research conference organized by Mike Atkin at Stanford. I remember conversing with Sue about teachers' research, her background as a singer and major in music, and about children, with Sue sharing Laura's picture and talking about Andy's violin playing. Her researcher, teacher, and mother selves were clearly interwoven, all part of the same fabric. I was delighted when Sue joined our Curriculum and Instruction (C & I) department at Illinois a couple of years later.

Our connections occurred in the corridor; in division and department meetings; in doctoral students' "rite of passage" aural defenses; in our respective offices; at Krannert Center; at parties in our respective houses. The Aesthetics in CATE (the division of Curriculum, Aesthetics, and Teacher Education) was Sue's contribution. I recall that the A in CATE was for "And" before Sue became a division head. Sue had an ear for the beautiful, the magnificent, the inspiring. We have often attended Krannert concerts, sharing a love for classical music. I knew she cherished the same notions of beauty represented in classical music, and the reverence. But her commitment to political issues was never absent. I remember the Vienna Philharmonic concert, where I marveled at their performance. Sue noted a gender issue, commenting on the fact that they had no women in the orchestra. I knew she was right, but held to my own stance.

Paraphrasing Parker Palmer's "We teach, and research, who we are", Sue's research and teaching were clearly generated by who she was. She was keenly aware of people who are marginalized, attentive to political dimensions and power issues, offering support and being present. Sue has left a hole. She has represented a way of being, one with integrity, depth, wry humor, attentiveness, and kindness. She had the gift of articulating ideas clearly, elegantly, forcefully. She was one of those people who made an impact, and a difference. I have always wanted to sit in her Curriculum course, knowing that my own notions of curriculum will be expanded, transformed. Instead, I sent all my doctoral advisees to take her courses, hoping that their expansion will touch my own (it did). Some of their deep learning is articulated below, adding two voices of professors of music education in Illinois and Lund University, Sweden.

Heather Harris
Ph.D. Candidate in C & I, University of Illinois

The syllabus for Sue Noffke's Historical and Critical Issues in Curriculum Theory graduate seminar was labeled as a musical composition. She designated weeks as "interludes" and drew the course to a close with a "coda." With the exception of one such interlude on aesthetic curriculum, the content of the seminar was not explicitly arts-based. Instead, it examined curriculum through a variety of historical and theoretical lenses. Yet, her use of musical terms was not simply a clever device for segmenting our readings. For Sue, the language of music expressed the rhythm of life in a classroom. It spoke to the mental crescendos and diminuendos that come from grappling with big, challenging ideas and to making those ideas work together while still refuting the notion that they must follow a linear progression.

Sue was trained as a musician and often referenced the importance of this part of her biography to her personal and scholarly development. While she moved on to become a Social Studies teacher and later an educator of pre-service educators in that discipline, she never divorced herself from her own artistry. She consciously carved out space for the aesthetic even in courses where it could have easily been pushed to the periphery or erased all together. We read the great curricular theorists, but we analyzed their work by looking at the paintings of Ralph Fasanella, or listening to recordings of songs sung in Southern freedom schools, or analyzing the illustrations of children's books. For those of us who work in arts education, we know that this acknowledgement of our presence and power is precious. But Sue also never allowed her affinity to let us off the hook. When embarking on a research project about standards-based education in the arts, Sue pushed me to ask tough questions of myself and of the organization I was studying. Her motives stemmed from her unyielding commitment to social justice and her belief that every aspect of education should be held up to a critical light to see whether it passed the essential litmus test of serving the best interest of all children.

Sue steadfastly adhered to the values of equity and justice that she held most dear, and she made her position known through a well-honed wit. It was this balance of humor and stalwartness that made her an ideal mentor in my first semester of Ph.D. coursework. She was at once approachable and intimidating by virtue of her intellect and expansive knowledge of curriculum theory. She was caring but in no way coddling, instead poking and prodding with questions that sometimes rendered me silent with their enormity. Yet whenever we as a collective were struck dumbfounded, she reminded us that we were up to the task and that a graduate seminar need not be an exercise in one-upping others with our esoteric vocabularies. She wanted us to be grounded in the reality of classroom practice and to produce scholarship that would make a difference, not just in the world of academia, but also in schools and communities.

It is that imperative that I will carry with me from my time working with Sue—to do work that matters and to do it with an artistry that makes it come alive. It is difficult to craft a coda for Sue’s life because it was a symphony cut short. But if there is one way to round out the composition, it would be for all those lucky enough to be invested with this charge to do our best to embody it in our art and in our teaching.

Stephanie Cronenberg
Ph.D. candidate in C & I, University of Illinois

About a week after learning of Sue’s passing, I’m standing in the Walnut Hill School, a one-room school-house turned museum on John’s Island, South Carolina. On the walls, I’m reading about Citizenship Schools, the legacy of Septima Clark, and the education of African Americans immediately following the Civil War. Built in 1868, Walnut Hill School is the beginning of African American public education on John’s Island. Standing in this space, I feel Sue is there with me.

In the fall of 2012, I took a graduate class with Sue on curriculum history and theory. As an arts person herself, Sue encouraged the perspectives of arts educators in her classes. Her commitment to inviting multiple perspectives in the classroom extended beyond embracing arts educators, and challenged each of us to see beyond the paradigms into which we had been enculturated through our teacher education programs and our teaching and learning experiences. In this class, Sue introduced students to the multiple perspectives and experiences of various groups of people involved in U.S. public education at the turn of the last century. The way Sue presented the multiplicity of U.S. education helped me to see beyond the concepts, principles, histories and theories I had been taught in my pre-service program as “the way.”

For me, this is Sue’s legacy. She stretched the boundaries and taught a new generation of scholars to see beyond the silos so often cultivated in academia. She taught us to question the value of objective driven curriculum, to read a book calling for change, to talk to people outside the arts, or to stand in a one-room school-house and see the history first hand – for this I thank her.

Kimber Andrews
Ph.D. Candidate in C & I, University of Illinois

I had the pleasure of taking a class with Dr. Sue Noffke in the Fall of 2012. Although my time with her was short, her influence is ongoing. Her course on the history of curriculum theory, helped me feel emplaced in a tradition, and the breadth of her syllabus encompassed a wide variety of voices and perspectives.

However, when I think of Sue, what resonates are not the particulars of her syllabus, but her style of teaching—her presence, voice, manner—all of the intangibles that imbue a classroom with its tone, pace, and lasting impressions. To take a course with Sue was to experience what John Dewey characterizes as an aesthetic experience—a feeling of consummation not merely completion—or rather the gathering of meanings and ideas that accumulate to make a whole that is more than the sum of its parts. The consummation of Sue’s class is still in the making for me. It is like listening to a piece of music for the first time that moves you, but you don’t know how or why until you can replay it in your mind several times.

Sue understood the intangibility of the aesthetic, and she incorporated it into the class. She often brought in richly illustrated children’s books that dealt with challenging issues like identity, power, racism, and sexism. She would pass them around for the class to look at, and then encouraged us to discuss how the aesthetics of the illustrations and stories related to, or told us something new about the theoretical or historical articles we were reading. She also brought in films and music that could add to the views we were reading, thus creating a textured portrait of the context surrounding curriculum theory.

In my struggle to try to put into words the intangibles of Sue’s presence, I used one of Sue’s own techniques and looked to the aesthetic for some ideas. One of my favorite characters from young adult literature came to mind—Charlotte, from E.B. White’s novel *Charlotte’s Web*. In the book, Charlotte is a spider who saves the life of a pig named Wilbur by spinning messages in her web about Wilbur’s eminent greatness. The spider metaphor is apt for Sue because of her deft weaving ability. She would often ask the class to share how the readings connected to our lived experience as educators, theorists, and human beings. With a nimble mind and gentle fingers she would then take our filaments of thought and make a connection point with the larger web.

One of the first messages Charlotte weaves in her web above Wilbur’s pen is “Some Pig.” Sue did something similar with her students. She saw our potential and recognized it publicly—like a banner over our heads that read “Some Scholar”—drawing attention to our ideas and taking them seriously. However, Sue’s banners of encouragement were not conspicuously positive like a cheerleader, but had the depth of someone that really looks, listens, and can reflect back on one’s potential.

Sue nurtured her students with a gentle but strong voice. Like Charlotte, her plain words of wisdom had a simplicity that can take a lifetime to fully resonate. She often reminded us before a paper was due, that our grandmothers, parents, or friends should be able to read it and understand what we were talking about—that the apparatus of academic speech was merely another language to master, but to not let it limit or devalue our own experiential

understanding of the world. Sue embodied aesthetics through her ability to really see, listen, and attend to both her students and the ever-changing landscape of curriculum as a field and embolden a new generation of scholars to add their own voice to the tapestry.

Donna Murray-Tiedge

Ph.D. candidate in C & I, Aesthetic Education, University of Illinois

I was on the road when I received word of Professor Noffke's untimely passing. In disbelief, I reran our last encounter. It was late May when I was entering, and she was leaving the Education Building. We were not far from the classroom where she taught me about action research. Her course was my last formal stop in a series of research methodology classes. I had already studied qualitative foundations, qualitative methods, case study methods, mixed methods and advanced interpretive methods, under some of the best names in social science research. My advisor suggested a research education at Illinois would not be complete without Sue Noffke's action research class.

I enrolled in her class, intrigued with the action research cycle. Already a fan of Dewey and Kolb, and having professionally experienced the cyclical nature of the design process, I was anxious to learn more about the action research cycle. I came to curriculum and instruction from the visual-spatial world of art and design. In an attempt to integrate the complexities of the five research classes I had taken, I created an instantiated thinking tool that divided the research process into ten levels (paradigm stance, purpose, methodology, and options relating to qualitative genre, quantitative genre, research design, data generation, analysis, dissemination, and validity and trustworthiness considerations). Each level contained six wedge-shaped wooden blocks and each block displayed tripartite bits of information. I used this tool as a review and reflection aid, and relied on its scaffolding as I attempted to navigate through my early research requirement. In spite of the vast body of knowledge my tool represented, I was still getting lost in the research process. I showed the tool to Dr. Noffke and proposed that I would examine my process through action research, in an effort to improve and make my practice more meaningful.

Dr. Noffke embraced my proposal, and then challenged me with a question. What was my social justice component? I answered her question with a question. Must an action research project have a social justice component? She looked at me and smiled but remained quiet. I broke the silence by telling her my research did not have a social justice component, but it did strive for improvement. Hearing this, her eyes narrowed, her facial expression became firm. After several seconds had passed, she said, in a stern voice, something like, "Is it *just* that verbal thinkers dominate the field of educational research, and visual-spatial thinkers simply present an *alternative* way to think? Is it *just* that nearly all components of the formal

curriculum appear in verbal formats, predominantly in written text?" Dr. Noffke showed me that my research did have a social justice component.

Introducing Dr. Noffke to my blocks opened up a space between us that we returned to again and again, even long after the class ended. When we were not talking about action research, or social justice, we talked about three dimensional design. She was particularly proud of her daughter, an architectural student at Pratt, and frequently shared with me details and sometimes links to her daughter's projects. She loved her family, and she loved the arts, and she was passionate in her beliefs.

I will miss running into Dr. Noffke at the Education Building. I will miss our impromptu chats. I will not miss recognizing the essential component of social justice in research projects I pursue. The recursive cycles that make up my life will continue to be impacted by Dewey, Kolb, and Sue Noffke.

Tawnya D. Smith

Ph.D. Candidate in C & I, University of Illinois

I first met Sue Noffke as a student in her Action Research Methods class. In my naïveté, I first perceived her as stoic and cynical, yet as the course unfolded the focus of her questions along with the way she framed issues in class revealed a woman with a deep passion for social justice. She modeled courage and commitment towards taking a hard and honest look at some of the most disturbing and serious of problems and issues. It became clear just how important it was to her that research empower the weakest and most disadvantaged of persons. A few years have passed now since I took her course, yet I remain impressed by her dedication to forwarding the methodology of action research. More importantly, I respect and honor her legacy of empowering researchers, teachers, and community members to conduct research to solve educational and community problems.

Having Dr. Noffke as a member of my dissertation committee, I felt empowered to pursue a topic and methodology where I facilitated individuals to conduct their own inquiry in a group context. Her interest in and support for the arts was strong, and I felt supported by this. Although my dissertation is methodologically more like arts-based research than action research, my methods are meant to empower each of the participants as they investigate their own personal processes via the arts. In the early research process, Sue wisely reminded me to take into account that the inner experiences of each individual were also socially constructed and negotiated. While I had assumed this, I had not made it explicit. Making it more explicit helped me construct a much stronger study. Currently, I am studying the inner experiences of six musicians who participated in a free musical improvisation workshop where they used art

response, journaling, and group discussion to investigate their inner mental states while making music.

I will miss Dr. Noffke's direct and honest comments, and her unwavering focus on matters of social justice. I trust that her influence will carry forward as her students and colleagues work towards a more just world in both subtle and direct ways.

Wei-Ren Chen, Ph.D.

Teacher, Taipei Municipal Mandarin Experimental Elementary School

In the Spring Semester of 2008, I was a doctoral student at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. With my advisor's recommendation, I took the Action Research course taught by Dr. Susan Noffke. Having a strong belief in empowering practitioners and minorities, Dr Noffke paid attention to multiple *voices* in our class. She opened a conversation zone to encourage international students to share ideas and experiences. Her recommended readings also focused on how to listen carefully to students' and practitioners' voices and taking innovative action to transform their life in schools. Voice, a word I learned so much from Dr. Noffke, became a vivid metaphor that guided me to realize the essence of action research.

Working as an elementary school teacher for students with special needs in my home country, I found that it is meaningful to regard students' voices and silence as a channel to reflect on my own teaching. I recalled a book recommended by Dr. Noffke, *Regarding Children's Words* (Ballenger, 2004). One chapter in the book describes how a high school teacher made sense of the imagination of two students with cognitive delays through the reading of an adolescent novel. The students were encouraged to speak about connections with the novel and the problems they encountered in real life; the teacher learned the meaning of imagination for functional curriculum. For me, it implies that orchestrating multiple voices among student seeking, teacher response, and curriculum design is the artistry of reflexivity, a provocative concept I learned so much from Dr. Noffke's class.

Training as a researcher who is interested in art and education, I look for a fruitful and organic space in which my inquiry could consider more of the aesthetic. I believe that teacher researchers need to communicate their voices just like artists who express their ideas through their works of art in public. *Going Public with Our Teaching* (2005) was the other book we discussed in Dr. Noffke's class. By reading practitioner researchers' stories, I was impressed by their fight for the rights of students in public as well as producing knowledge through coping with teaching dilemmas. The practical wisdom documented in the book reflects Dr. Noffke's (1991) notion of examining knowledge, knowers, and knowledge production in practitioner research. I learned from Dr. Noffke that it is important to weave a polyphonic

world or an aesthetic space between the identities of those who create knowledge as well as the process by which it is created.

Dr. Noffke, thank you for your kindness and enriching classes! I know what I learned from you will influence my pursuit of being a reflexive educator as well as an aesthetic researcher. Allow me to share an unexpected encounter. I liked to study at the Urbana Public Library during my days as a doctoral student. One day, I found your name on the road of yellow bricks in a lovely garden outside the historical library. You must have made some kind of contribution so that they have inscribed your name there. I came to realize how your academic intellect has profoundly integrated with your private life. At that moment, I know I will carry your spirit through my academic journey.

Koji Matsunobu, Ph.D.

Honorary Research Fellow, University of Queensland; University of Kumamoto, Japan

I was fortunate to have met Sue and taken her curriculum course while I was at the University of Illinois. I knew that Sue completed her B.A. in music education. But what struck me most was her critical perspective on curriculum. She took the side of the oppressed and encouraged us to look at the U.S. history and curriculum practice from the other angle. At the same time, she was aware that the U.S. framework is not universally applicable to other countries. She encouraged us, especially international students, to reflect how political standpoints of the right and the left take shape in each cultural context. Many thoughts came to my mind about the Japanese situation, but I couldn't articulate well in the class. Seven years later, I wrote in a book chapter,

...The alternation given to Japanese music educators is not either multiculturalism or ethnocentrism, liberal or conservative, progressivism or traditionalism, or any equivalent polarity that is often shaped and contested in other countries, for instance: in the debates over multicultural education and "cultural literacy" in the United States (Hirsch, 1987), each representing the stance of the Left and the Right (Apple, 2001). Japanese music educators are now faced with the two poles at the same time, which together leading to cultural diversity of Japanese music education.

The point I wanted to make is that the Japanese, as a result of the exclusion of Japanese music from the official curriculum for over a hundred years, now see the tradition as one of the many genres of music on the left side. This was my delayed response to Sue's question. Her assignment remained in my mind, kept asking me to think and wonder, and live with it. I wished I could discuss with her my thoughts.

As I write this, I recall many memorable moments of the class. The day after the result of the 2004 U.S. presidential election was confirmed, she sighed deeply in the class. Her gesture somehow empowered us. Her observation of Condoleezza Rice's unusual feminine demeanor was acute. From her, I learned the true meaning of the axiom: what we teach is who we are. I still remember the first day I met Sue. I asked her why she studied music and why she no longer remained in music education. Without explaining the details, she encouraged me to venture into aesthetic education and qualitative research. I was inspired by her own journey originally beginning in music education. I saw her as someone embodying an ideal vision of education with aesthetics at its center.

Each professor at Illinois taught me unique perspectives and ways of thinking. Without Sue, my learning experience at Illinois wouldn't have been as perfect as it was.

Jeananne Nichols, DMA
Assistant Professor of Music Education, University of Illinois

I met Sue Noffke just two years ago when I joined the faculty at the University of Illinois. Previously, I had known her through her writing about action research and in preparation for writing this tribute, I revisited some of her articles that I had collected in the last few years. I ran across the following in her chapter on the Sage Handbook of Educational Action Research:

It seems to me that rather than work solely within the academic norms of identifying, owning, and marketing the idea of action research, we need to be constantly looking for our 'fellow travellers', our allies, our comrades with whom we can form coalitions around our shared interests.

Even during the short time I knew her, a time when she was struggling with health concerns, she was still at work building coalitions to advance social justice in school and in the community.

While we served on dissertation committees together and talked at events at the College of Education, I most enjoyed working with her as part of Action Research Illinois, a community engagement program sponsored by the College of Fine and Applied Arts. Sue served as a mentor for new programs and I had received a seed grant to provide art and music programming in the local juvenile detention center. Sue took particular interest in the project and talked with me and the graduate students as we worked through the aims and logistics of doing art and music with incarcerated young people. It did not matter that we were from

another college, we were “fellow travelers, allies, comrades.” As a newcomer to the university, I treasured her counsel and I will sorely miss her wisdom in the days to come.

Anna Houmann, Ph.D. in Music Education
Senior lecturer at Malmö Academy of Music
Lund University

I have never met Sue Noffke in person. Still I feel that I have done so through her work. Just a couple of weeks ago I introduced action research, and in that sense Sue, to some students of mine. They wanted to study their own musical practice when using meditation as a tool. Through Sue’s work they found a structure and also a pathway that could give a helping hand, someone/something to lean on during the process.

We have been using her arguments on why educators should use action research for many years. In that way, she has helped us build a strong foundation for action research at the Malmö Academy of Music. In different kinds of projects and on different levels in music teacher education, we use action research so that students and teachers can better understand and develop their own praxis. It also provides an avenue to create new knowledge that can come in useful for other teachers and students. I would say that the legacy of Sue’s approach on action research at the Malmö Academy of Music is its contribution to the possibility of equality and democracy.

We greatly appreciate all the inspiration, the different perspectives and possibilities her work has given us.

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About the Authors

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Tawnya D. Smith is a Ph.D. Candidate in Curriculum and Instruction at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Her current research integrates expressive arts therapy principles in arts learning environments as a means to promote holistic learning grounded in the learner's authentic and developing self. Specifically, Tawnya is experimenting with free musical improvisation and multi-modal art response as a means for learners to explore the self in community.

Wei-Ren Chen received his Ph.D. in curriculum and instruction at University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. His research interests are in gifted education and aesthetic education.

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