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The Arts, Efficiency, and Education: Celebrating The Work of Elliot Eisner

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In spring of 2006, Elliot Eisner was exhibiting early symptoms of Parkinson's disease, but had not yet been diagnosed. My chance to help came through accepting the role of unofficial teaching assistant for his Doctoral Seminar in Curriculum and Teaching—driving him to school, occasionally chiming in, and helping him put his coat on after class. As a thank you, Elliot and his wife, Ellie, took my wife and me out to dinner at Boulevard Restaurant in San Francisco. The conversation and food lasted several hours, and the night offered the right mood to ask about something personal—our poor high school records. I mentioned how, during our first class, he mentioned he had graduated high school with a GPA of 2.5 or so (a point above mine). He paused, looked over, and said, in a phrase I fondly remember, “I always had intellectual interests, but my school lacked intellectual opportunities.”

Eisner will undoubtedly be remembered for his convincing arguments that advocated for schools that offered the intellectual opportunities that his lacked. Specifically, he wrote of what education could learn from the arts, and this notion transformed our field. He did this through an understanding of the importance of the arts in the larger context of standardization, industrialization, and technological approaches to learning.

The central text in Eisner's work was undoubtedly Dewey's *Art as Experience* (1934). Dewey's argument in Chapter 12, "The Challenge to Philosophy," posits that any philosophical approach can be assessed by how well it handles the arts: "There is no test that so surely reveals the one-sidedness of a philosophy as its treatment of art and esthetic experience" (p. 274). Eisner made a similar move in his work, testing conceptions of education by how well they allowed for, celebrated, and demanded the full richness of human experience as found in the arts. Eisner continually invoked the arts as a bulwark against educational efforts that rested on shallow conceptions of what it means to learn and to be alive.

To ground his critique of educational approaches, Eisner convincingly presented problematic aspects in common conceptions of education. To do this, he turned to Raymond Callahan's (1962) *Education and the Cult of Efficiency*. He cited the text in many of his canonic works: on expressive objectives (1969), in developing educational connoisseurship (1976), critiquing assessment (1993), his questioning of educational standards (1995), and the book for which he won the Grawemeyer Award (2002). Elliot gave his copy of the Callahan to me when he retired, and his marginalia in the text—from fading pen markings to modern PostIts, and folded newspaper articles that echoed its themes—provides a testimony to its importance across his career for writing and teaching.

Callahan's history covers the rush to bring Taylorism and the assembly line to schools. He noted how even progressives like Ellwood Cubberly, the former dean of Stanford's School of Education whose name, in a small irony, adorns the building in which Eisner worked, wrote, "Our schools are, in a sense, factories in which the raw products (children) are to be shaped into products to meet the various demands of life" (Cubberley, 1916, p. 325). While Dewey provided Eisner a way to imagine education at its most-rich and aspirational, Callahan's history of education helped Eisner expose it at its most impoverished. The arts, then, provided a basis upon which a critique could be mounted against educational conceptions that prioritized standardization, high-stakes tests, efficiency, and systems of accountability.

Eisner was successful in his arguments: he provided a strong critique, always clearly articulated, and he connected these arguments to the enduring reasons people became teachers in the first place. For artists, he provided a set of conceptions and ideas that celebrated the intellectual and expressive aspects of arts in their fullness, yet using language persuasive for policymakers. For educational theorists, he provided ideas such as expressive outcomes (the preferred formulation of his earlier "expressive objectives") and educational criticism—approaches to assess and evaluate education without sacrificing validity or a rich conception of human development. He convincingly argued for schools as places for the celebration of thinking (1988), critiqued educational objectives (1967), and asked what is meant when we

ask if a school is doing well (2001). These texts remain central for many in education—not mere niche products. Furthermore, the ideas embodied in those various texts reached their culmination in his AERA Presidential Address (E. W. Eisner, 1993).

Eisner’s teaching was filled with simple statements that evoked the issues he championed. I recall a class where he began by noting that assembly lines were designed not only to be efficient, but uneventful. He asked us to consider the implications of that model when brought into schools, guiding a frank and fruitful discussion. Another time he began a discussion by noting, “You don’t tell your friend before a movie that in order to be satisfied it should have one love scene, two big explosions, and a car chase. You go out after for coffee to discuss what you experienced. Why should we consider education with less flexibility than we would a movie?”

Eisner’s pedagogy excited many students including myself, particularly in achieving his central aspiration, about which he wrote, “I believe that the key role of the doctoral preparation is to prepare students to think imaginatively about the ways in which the educational world can be studied and improved” (2005, p. 5). I had the honor of knowing this in an intimate way. He continued, right to the end of his life, to speak with me about ideas I was exploring, issues about which I was writing, and my attempts to enhance educational practice through the kind of imaginative work he championed (Thibeault, 2014).

As he told me over the dinner I fondly remember, Eisner’s high school lacked educational opportunities. Thankfully, he sought them out for the rest of his life and shared them generously with others. In a non-religious way, I regard the teaching, mentoring, and friendship I received from Elliot as a blessing, a gift for which I forever will remain grateful. So, too, educators have received the blessing of his ideas—passionate, imaginative, and articulate reminders of what we might be in our best moments.

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