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The House that Inspiration Built: Remembering Elliot W. Eisner

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The ultimate aim of education is to enable individuals to become the architects of their own education and through that process to continually reinvent themselves.

- Elliot W. Eisner

The first time I met Elliot Eisner was in 1983 at his house in Stanford, California. It was a beautiful modern abode on a hill, filled with African art and abstract paintings. Walking up the entrance and into the dining area complete with a flagstone fireplace, afternoon light poured in through windows on the far wall. Dr. Eisner moved about this space swiftly, fielding a phone call, and shuffling papers on the dining table. To the left of the dining area, set off by the fireplace is a living room. There we both sat on the couch facing each other for our formal conversation about my attending Stanford. My recollections of the interview are a blur. The only question I can remember him asking me was whether I taught in a traditional public school classroom. "No," I said, but quickly added, "I went to one." He smiled. I had no idea whether I would gain entrance into Stanford.

I had become fascinated with Dr. Eisner's ideas by reading his varied essays on educational criticism and connoisseurship. Having worked in an alternative school for gifted students who were underachieving in the regular high school, I knew that traditional forms of assessment did not tell the whole story. The students in this school all scored well above average; what they needed was not "more" academics, but an education that had meaning and relevance. Thus, Eisner's ideas about finding the idiosyncrasies of actual teaching and learning thrilled me. Moreover, the tone of his works, a scholar in urgent pursuit of new ideas that carried immediate relevance to schools, was just the kind of journey I was seeking.

At Stanford, I took every class that Elliot taught: courses on curriculum, qualitative research, aesthetic education, and even his art education class. (At the time I was a social studies educator.) What came across in each course was a scholar vitally engaged in intellectual ideas. These were not courses with finely tuned objectives and a preconceived notion of what would transpire. These were opportunities to engage the text of an author—probe, prod, and debate. Elliot's enthusiasm, rigor of thought, and imagination brought each class to life and no one knew where it would end.

I worked a lot with Elliot even when I was not taking classes from him on research projects, conferences he set up, and eventually my own dissertation. Often he gave me the choice of meeting him at his house, usually early in the morning, or at Stanford later in the day. Now, I must admit I am not a morning person, but at the office Elliot's intensity was magnified. Thus, he could be abrupt if you caught him at the wrong moment. At home, even while focused and engaged, he was more relaxed. I always chose his house for our meeting.

Much of what I think about Elliot is captured in the book, *Intricate Palette: Working the Ideas of Elliot Eisner* (2005). I won't repeat them here, except for one vignette that will resonate with anyone lucky enough to have spent time with him. We were in Seattle and passed by a Persian carpet store in Pike Place Market. We looked at a few carpets and Elliot crouched down to one in particular, tugging the edge and sending a ripple through the sheen of the carpet. Noticing Elliot's connoisseurship of the Persian carpet, the salesperson invited us through the back rooms to a smaller warehouse of select carpets reserved for serious aficionados. Elliot always seems to discern aspects of the world most of us would miss. Many years later as we were driving from the Denver International Airport to my home, Elliot looked at an old industrial building and announced that the windows were the original. One could tell, he said, by the wavy glass. Elliot's appreciation of the subtleties of life was endless and it heightened the experience of anyone paying attention. It certainly heightened mine.

I also had the opportunity to meet Elliot and his wife Ellie for lunch or dinner at many AERA conferences. The conversations at these meals floated from matters pertaining to family and

friends, the world at large, and our work. Oftentimes, I shared specific ideas that I was thinking about and running them by Eisner always sharpened my thinking. By asking just the right question, Elliot, always had me leaving meals feeling rejuvenated, with logic restored, and educational implications refined.

Much more could be said about Elliot and how much he has meant to my work and life, but I'd like to pay brief homage to *his* support system, his wife Ellie. (I know Elliot's kids and grandchildren brought immeasurable happiness and support to Elliot too, but that story may be better told by others.) From my vantage point, from the time Elliot was struck with Parkinson's, Ellie was always at his side caring for him. Of course, Ellie had always been there for Elliot, but what I want to highlight here is that without her, Elliot's career would have shortened by several years. I know I speak for a multitude of people in saying that shortening Elliot's career even by one year would have been a great loss. As it was, Elliot attended every AERA conference he was able, his last being in San Francisco (2013) where he attended the Professors of Curriculum meeting, among other venues. His mere presence changed a room and it was because of Ellie's commitment in these final years that we have all benefited. On behalf of the academic community, I extend her our deepest appreciation.

For the last several years, I called Elliot at least twice a month—sometimes more. We talked about our lives. He shared that he had good days and bad ones. “It depends on the right combination of drugs,” he confided. Until the very end he was working on new ideas. With Susan Freeman's assistance, his last publication came out in the *Curriculum Teaching Dialogue* (2013). It's my understanding that one draft of ideas still remain. At the end of each phone call, Elliot told me how much my taking the time to call meant to him. He thanked me profusely, which of course was unnecessary, and I told him that the pleasure was all mine—and I meant it. Until his last day he inspired me to be the best scholar/practitioner I could be.

Elliot passed away at home on January 10, 2014. No doubt Elliot lives on through the people he has touched and the pages of the works he created. He opened my eyes to what education is and what could be, and he taught me us how to see with an enlightened eye and imagination.

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About the author

P. Bruce Uhrmacher is Professor of Education and Chair of the Department of Educational Research, Policy and Practice, in the Morgridge College of Education at the University of Denver. He also serves as the faculty advisor for the Institute of Creative Teaching (formerly the Aesthetic Education Institute of Colorado), co-sponsored by the Morgridge College of Education and Think(360)Arts. His research interests include alternative education, Waldorf schools, research methods, and understanding teaching, curriculum, and learning from artistic and aesthetic viewpoints.

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