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Education by Invitation

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Like the other tributes that appear in this issue of *IJEA*, I too wish to celebrate the inspiration and achievements of Elliot Eisner. Elliot was a thoughtful, cogent, and compelling author. Moreover, he was a mesmerizing speaker and an iconoclast in the original sense of that word. Elliot was also a wonderful teacher, and below I argue that his triumphs in teaching are of a type rarely seen. Within the constraints of this short essay, I will describe three specific educational experiences for which I have Elliot to thank. The first two occurred while I was a doctoral student at Stanford University: the third a decade later.

Years before the Stanford School of Education began offering courses in qualitative research, Elliot was teaching seminars with titles such as Educational Criticism and Connoisseurship. The term I took Elliot's criticism course, he arranged for us to view Lina Wertmüller's classic film *Seven Beauties*. The class then read a lengthy criticism of the film that appeared in a 1979 issue of *The New Yorker*. The review's author was Freudian psychologist and Holocaust survivor Bruno Bettelheim. Dr. Bettelheim himself, at Elliot's invitation, showed up at our next class session to discuss the film and his review.

I was impressed to have such a famous guest speaker, but even more so when Bettelheim turned up at one of the casual dinners Elliot frequently held for his doctoral students. Albeit

more than thirty years ago, I vividly remember sitting in Elliot's living room listening to Bettelheim describe his childhood in Austria. He told us that he, like other elementary age students at that time, had stayed with the same teacher for four or five consecutive years. Someone asked what he had learned from having the same teacher for such an extended period. Bettelheim replied: "Well, we learned to get along."

The second example I will describe also originated in Elliot's course on educational criticism. The term I took that course, one of the other students was a member of the Christian Brothers, the order famed for producing fine wines and brandies. Elliot asked the student if he could help him arrange a wine tasting for the class. The class met in the School of Education lounge on the appointed evening. On a large table in the front of the room were six short rows of unopened wine bottles. I investigated, taking a bottle from the first row. It was a 1978 cabernet sauvignon. A bottle from the next row was again a 1978 cabernet sauvignon. All of the bottles were 1978 cabernet sauvignons, but each row represented a different vintner. As the tasting got underway, I learned that our task as junior wine connoisseurs was not to compare one vintner's cabernet with another. Rather, the Christian Brothers (our tutors that evening) asked that we judge each wine in terms of its own individual qualities. This was an important lesson. Still today in my classroom research, I seek to understand the particular qualities of an individual teacher, school, or lesson without comparing the case at hand with others of its classification. Incidentally, that evening I also learned something about research design. Conducting my dissertation study a year later, I selected a "like sample" of six participants. All six taught high school English, but at different schools. Alas, I was unable to recruit six teachers of the same vintage.

My third example of Elliot's mentorship occurred a decade later. For an academic sabbatical, I returned to Stanford as a visiting scholar. Because Elliot was away from campus that spring, he asked me to stand in for him helping to teach an undergraduate course titled, *The Work of Art and the Creation of Mind*. This course was Elliot's brainchild. It included four Stanford professors (in addition to myself), each responsible for roughly two weeks of the course calendar. The first two weeks was taught by a professor from the Drama Department. He divided the class into several small groups, and each group staged, rehearsed and performed a short scene from a play by Euripides. The next two weeks were under the direction of a music professor. During that time we learned taiko drumming and sang with a local choir. We went on to learn dance routines from a professor of modern dance, and create installation art with the help of a visual arts professor. When my weeks came up, I assigned a short book of poetry and brought in its author, a professor from UC Santa Cruz, to discuss his work with the class. We also wrote and shared group poems. Overall, it was a risk to engage in art rather than study it, but perhaps for that reason, the class quickly developed a wonderful sense of community.

Each of these examples I regard as an educational experience. Each furthered my growth on a practical and intellectual basis for which I am indebted. Note, however, that in all three examples I did not learn anything directly from Elliot. When he was actually present, as in the first two examples, Elliot remained behind the scenes. He arranged for the events but was not on stage. Bettelheim was on stage, as well as other luminaries who often came to Elliot's regular get-togethers. It was the Christian Brothers, not Elliot, who taught me to better discern the color, clarity, body, and bouquet of wine. The undergraduates, other professors, and the Santa Cruz poet taught me about the various arts which they were in the process of mastering. Elliot was two thousand miles away, but he had set the wheels in motion.

I do not mean to discount Elliot's role in any of these cases. On the contrary, his role is exactly the point—the larger lesson that I am still learning after three decades. What I learned is that great teachers can neither have an experience for their students, nor can they give their students an experience by substituting their own. Elliot invited me in his home and into his classrooms. He invited me to AERA and into his professional life. Great teachers introduce their students to places, people, and events; and then they step out of the way so that others may have their own experiences. This is what Elliot did for his students. He invited us to the party.

About the author

David J. Flinders is Professor in the School of Education at Indiana University, Bloomington. He is a former AERA Vice President for Division B and has served as President of the American Association for Teaching and Curriculum. Flinders is also co-editor of *The Curriculum Studies Reader 4th Edition* and *Teaching and Curriculum Dialogue*. His interests include curriculum theory, secondary education reform, qualitative research, peace education, and high-altitude research.

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