

International Journal of Education & the Arts

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

ISSN: 1529-8094

Volume 15 Special Issue 1.14

February 28, 2014

Meeting Elliot Eisner's Spirit through Anecdotes

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Citation: Schonmann, S. (2014). Meeting Elliot Eisner's spirit through anecdotes. *International Journal of Education & the Arts*, 15(SI 1.14). Retrieved from <http://www.ijea.org/v15si1/>.

"Our telling is a way of making public what we have come to know."

(Eisner, 1991, p.68)

This entire volume is devoted to Elliot Eisner's scholarship and legacy. I shall address it in a more personal manner, via anecdotes of which Elliot himself was well aware.

A Lesson in Aesthetic and Critical Thought

It was a rainy day in January 1981. Seventeen students were gathered in a small classroom, in one of Stanford's beautiful ancient buildings, listening to Chopin, while staring at their professor who was sitting on the table. He took off his right shoe, took off the sock and began to rub his uncovered foot. An unsettling silence prevailed, unsolved dissonance between that sight and the sounds of Chopin. I was sitting there, staring at others uncomfortably moving their eyes to find resolution, the music stopped, Elliot put on his sock and his shoe in a quick energetic movement, stood up and asked: "Well, in what terms can you describe the experience you have just undergone? Can you explain the sense of the aesthetic that you

gained from this situation?" A loud laugh of relief was heard and we began to struggle to find the right words to define *aesthetic experience*. As days went by, we could find in his writings:

The phrase 'we are able to experience' is a critical one... What we are able to see or hear is a product of our cultivated abilities. The rewards and insights provided by aesthetically shaped forms are available only to those who can perceive them. (Eisner, 1998, p. 34)

It was a lesson that none of us would forget. What occurred in that lesson re-occurred throughout the semester and along the way through his teaching. The students had an extraordinary experience with his creative and provocative ideas of how to develop a thought and how to argue for it. His voice was clear, his eyes were encouraging, as though he were saying: "Go ahead, speak your mind... tell me..." It was long before his reputation breakthrough, in those days that he had to struggle to build his own status at Stanford. Right from the beginning he had the spirit of a warrior.

Aesthetic Modes of Knowing

Parallel to that time, Elliot Eisner allowed himself to provoke the mainstream thought of the educational community of scholars by developing the idea of *Aesthetic Modes of Knowing*. He wrote:

The phrase, 'aesthetic modes of knowing' presents something of a contradiction in our culture. We do not typically associate the aesthetic with knowing. The art, with which the aesthetic is most closely associated, is a matter of the heart. Science is thought to provide the most direct route to knowledge. Hence, 'aesthetic modes of knowing', is a phrase that contradicts the conception of knowledge that is most widely accepted. (Eisner, 1998, p. 33)

He tried to show that this widely accepted view was too narrow and that the roads to knowing are many.

Eisner's stand inspired my work in developing '*Theatrical modes of knowing*'. On my sabbatical, in 1996-7, I visited him at Stanford – to work with, to be inspired by, to engage his mind and to share in the development of ideas. It was one of the most productive chapters in my life. Elliot was always ready to meet, to listen, to argue, to comment and share his ideas, and to ask for honest critical comments. He tried hard to "free the aesthetic from the province of the arts alone and to recognize its presence in all human formative activity. All subjects have aesthetically significant features, from the process of making to the form the product finally takes" (Eisner, 1998, pp. 36-37). Elliot Eisner needed constant stimulation; he sought

to activate our 'sensory systems'; he looked to vary our experiences and to see in the aesthetic one, most important source of stimulation. From his deep commitment to the aesthetic not only as a motivation factor in life but also as a deep understanding that the aesthetic is also motivated by our need to give order to our world, a road to understanding education differently was opened. I returned to my students in Israel, trying to employ his many ways of seeing and thinking about research in curriculum, arts education, and teaching and teacher education. All of these areas, from that time on, were developing under the impression of his eloquent mentorship; clear and bright ideas, with ongoing deliberations with Elliot's aesthetic approach. Even now, a doctoral work of one of my students is being written; it is entitled: *Arts Education in the Kindergarten in Israel, from the Perspective of Elliot Eisner's Aesthetic Approach*. Elliot was happy to know that his ideas were rolling abroad and we had hoped that he would be able to read and comment. But, it gives us great pleasure to know that his spirit will continue to escort our work.

He argued "To confer aesthetic order upon our world is to make that world hang together, to fit, to feel right to put things in balance, to create harmony. Such harmonies are sought in all aspects of life" (Eisner, 1998, p. 38). He set out to find them. He loved to be surrounded by beautiful things, by beautiful people and beautiful ideas. He breathed the beauty of the world; beauty in the sense of quality, of merit and, in this sense, he himself was a beautiful human being.

Connoisseurship: The Art of Appreciation

At one of the AERA meetings, we were sitting in a session in which one young researcher was struggling with the idea of *connoisseurship*. Elliot bent over to me and said: "I should never have coined such a term ". His comment about misusing his terminology opened up a vivid discussion after the session, in which he explained to me his idea about words and their power, about the power of words to activate ideas or to block them. The young researcher did not understand Elliot's terminology. Educational connoisseurship and educational criticism are both particular species of qualitative inquiry which he had developed for more than a decade and eventually situated as the major focus in his famous book *The Enlightened Eye*:

Connoisseurship tends to conjure up something effete or elite. I have no intention that it do so;...there are few terms that do not possess some conceptual liabilities with respect to the way in which they might be interpreted. I recognize the potential liabilities of the terms I have chosen to use and express here the hope the readers will work with the terms I have chosen in the ways that I have elected to use them. (1991, p. 7)

Elliot regretted using such a term because his hope was not fully fulfilled as in this case.

I have tried to argue that by choosing to work with that term he enabled a greater visibility to the idea of 'knowing' *qualitative inquiry* and in so doing intrigued a deep discussion. But, he still said that he should have chosen another term, one more accessible. He was very emotional about that, which brought me back to his foundational thought that all productive thinking is infused with feeling, whereby "feeling permeates the forms of thinking we employ and provides us with the information we need to make judgments about the quality of our work. Mind is not separated from affect; affect is part and parcel of mind" (Eisner, 1998, p. 8).

Making Public

Elliot Eisner was a rare flower in the academic world. He was a special human being. I learned from him about being a warrior for the ideas that one believes in, about generosity and determination. Elliot inspires me to think about education in terms of arts and I feel privileged and empowered to convey his spirit to my own students and to go ahead and develop the question: "What education can learn from the arts" (Eisner 2002 p.196).

There is an old Indian maxim which says that without tears there will not be a rainbow to the soul. Elliot is living in this rainbow of the soul.

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About the author

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