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Meeting Elliot Eisner in His Office: Notes from a Photograph

Michelle Zoss
Georgia State University, USA

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Figure 1. NCTE Conference, November 2004. Stanford. Elliot with Tara, Steve, Sharon, and Melanie. I took the picture.

We took a taxi, CalTrain, and Marguerite bus to get to the Stanford campus. Then we walked to SUSE. At Stanford acronyms have their own lives. SUSE was the Stanford University School of Education—now renamed the GSE, Graduate School of Education.

On the train we talked about moments in our lives, *those* moments that meant the world to us. Sharon started. Let's talk about our experiences, she said. We talked about seeing sculptures in museums, looking over a city from a centuries-old church, reading at the kitchen table with grandparents. These experiences, these moments were times when we lingered over our actions, when we watched with fresh eyes to really see what was in front of us. Arriving at Elliot Eisner's office, a space filled with books, chairs, and a couch, we brought with us this conversation of perceiving the world and noting the qualities of our experiences that helped us make sense of what was important. Elliot opened the door with a smile and invited us to sit.

The first time I met Elliot was a moment that made both of us chuckle. I was a new student at Stanford in fall 2002. I had just moved to California and was determined to do well in the master's program. So I went to the university bookstore in late August. While looking for the Education 219 course – The Artistic Development of the Child – I realized I was not alone in my search. There was a man looking at a purple book with pencil drawings on the cover. He looked through a copy, nodded, and then put it back on the stack. The book was *The Arts and the Creation of Mind* (Eisner, 2002) and it was the main text for the course. In my excitement at the prospect of meeting another classmate, I said to this guy with a tidy cut of white hair and a ring with a large stone on it, Hi! Are you taking this class, too? I'm really looking forward to it.

He smiled. I plan on teaching it, he said. My name is Elliot.

He shook my hand. I turned red, very red. I managed to introduce myself.

That year he taught two classes that were open to master's students. I took them both.

In his office, Elliot talked with us about art, aesthetics, and education. He delighted my new friends from Georgia and answered many questions. We invited him to speak at our university for an arts-based research conference scheduled for the following year. He said he would be happy to continue the conversation.

January 2005. Qualitative and arts-based researchers from all over the U.S. and Canada gathered in Athens, Georgia to discuss, view, listen, and think about

possibilities in educational, health, and philosophical research. It was the 18th year of the conference, nicknamed QUIG, and the attendance was the highest ever. With the arts foremost in conversations, Colleagues presented research through paintings, poems, dramatic readings. An auditorium filled to capacity in anticipation of Elliot's keynote speech.

After Elliot's talk, I drove Elliot across town from the conference hotel to a party hosted by one of his doctoral graduates, Richard Siegesmund. While Elliot put on his seatbelt, I had a moment. In *that* moment Elliot's hand grasped the metal clip and I reached over to help him finish clicking it in place. I had done this same gesture multiple times with my grandfather just a year before. My grandfather was weak from cancer treatments and his body was beginning to fail him. In that motion of using my hand to guide Elliot's in putting on a seatbelt, I remembered my grandfather and understood the impact of Elliot's work on me.

In his courses, Elliot was a thorough teacher. He used Dewey's (1934/1989) chapter on having *an* experience as a cornerstone for teaching about perceiving qualities, understanding relationships. The work involved in completing Elliot's courses and subsequent conversations with him over the years helped me understand that what happens in schools is complex, requires attention and thought, and is always embedded within physical, emotional, and mindful people and their relationships with each other. Learning from Elliot became one of the cornerstones for pursuing my research agenda on understanding and advocating for integration of visual arts in English language arts curricula (Zoss, 2009; Zoss, Smagorinsky & O'Donnell-Allen, 2007; Zoss & White, 2011). Perceiving the gesture in my car, I saw the effects of my relationship with Elliot.

As a teacher educator and researcher, I embrace what the arts can offer, in part because Elliot provided eloquent writing that invited readers to join him in thinking through important ideas. In my courses, students pursue open-ended inquiries toward multiple end points and I await their projects knowing that there will always be something that surprises me.

After an hour of talking with Elliot, Melanie and I asked if he would sign our copies of *The Arts and the Creation of Mind*. He smiled again and pulled out a fountain pen. He wrote a short note to us both. One last request, I said. Could we take a picture? He laughed. I asked everyone to gather behind Elliot's chair. He took his glasses off. We all smiled. I took the picture.

Elliot taught that perceiving, really seeing a thing while thinking about and experiencing it, is an achievement of mind. His CV was one representation of many achievements over a lifetime of work that advocated and advanced the arts and qualitative research in education. Along the way Elliot also fostered relationships with graduate students that continue to resonate. In this image, I see the professor who offered a gracious gesture at our first encounter and who continued to listen and offer advice long after I graduated.

A note inside my book—Elliot: Thank you for pointing out the joy and surprise the arts bring to life, and the value of expression with and beyond words.

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About the author

Michelle Zoss is an assistant professor of English Education at Georgia State University. She focuses her research on the integration of visual arts in language arts teaching. Her publications include research on teachers’ curriculum decisions for teaching secondary students to communicate via writing and drawing. She also studied pre-service teachers to examine their uses of metaphors for teaching literacy in urban schools and their understandings of aesthetic experiences. Other publications argue for the need for students to learn to write and draw as they move through the K-12 school system. Her interests developed from educative university and school experiences, involved in teaching art and English in elementary and high schools in Las

Vegas, Nevada, and in earning degrees at The University of Iowa, Stanford University, and the University of Georgia.

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