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Elucidating Elliot Eisner

Stephen Mark Dobbs
Bernard Osher Foundation, USA

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Elliot Eisner loved language, and language loved Elliot Eisner. His affair with words flows back in a constant stream to boyhood, where he first exhibited the fluency that would become a hallmark in later professional life. One can almost imagine Elliot responding to one of his early school teachers, “That is a feckless proposition!”

Over time Elliot would become a master at stringing words together until, like Aphrodite springing full grown from the head of Zeus, his thinking would emerge in such pregnant lines as “artistic development is NOT an automatic consequence of maturation!” Certainly few writers in arts or education has contributed more to the rich and vivid use of language to elucidate concepts.

Evidence for this claim has been accumulating since Elliot’s first published article in *The High School Journal* in 1957. He wrote “What is art education for?” while serving as an art teacher at the Carl Schurz High School in Chicago.

Several decades later Elliot continued (along with the rest of us) laboring to provide good answers to that question. His own contribution to the inquiry is singularly impressive: several dozen books and major reports, hundreds of articles and invited papers, book chapters, and countless presentations.

The Eisner Literature includes *Educating Artistic Vision* (1972), *The Educational Imagination* (1979), *Cognition and Curriculum* (1982), *The Art of Educational Evaluation* (1985), *The Enlightened Eye* (1991), *The Kind of Schools We Need* (1998), *The Arts and the Creation of Mind* (2002), and *Arts-based Research* (with Tom Barone, 2012).

This fluency is unmatched in the field of art education or in the related educational disciplines in which Elliot participated: curriculum, qualitative assessment, and connoisseurship.

He must also bear a small share of the responsibility for having contributed to the trend toward global warming, as the trees sacrificed to Elliot's professional writing would stretch for many miles, certainly those that are converted into yellow-lined pads.

But these numbers do not fully reveal the power of Elliot Eisner's dexterity with language (if anything, he was ambidextrous with it!) In his teaching, writing and conversation, as well as in his more formal presentations, there was a dedication to clarity, conciseness, and cogency which is familiar to students, colleagues, and friends. His dedication to his listeners' and readers' understanding was one of his most admirable assets as a true teacher.

The appreciation of Elliot's ideas and their iteration in speech or print is not limited to those of the English language persuasion. His published material appears in at least a half-dozen other tongues, a testament to the authority and reach of his language and many years of building professional relationships with colleagues around the world.

Elliot was in fact a connoisseur of discourse. But the proof of connoisseurship goes beyond simply having (or wanting) something to say. For if a man has something to say but does not know how to say it, he will be ineffective. The verso is equally true: if a person has nothing to say, it does not matter how beautifully one says it. Or, to quote another Eisnerism, "If it's not worth saying, it's not worth saying well."

For Elliot the importance of expressing himself not only clearly but well became paramount. Professional audiences crowded into conference rooms wherever Elliot was speaking. People loved to hear him expound, his presentations marked by humor and humility. His speaking and writing is filled with helpful structure, supportive continuity, and incisive example.

Elliot didn't just use words, he felt them, he tasted and savored their qualities as they rolled off his pen or his tongue. Such hardies as isomorphic, noetic, pulchritude, recondite, ubiquitous -- not to mention the inimitable "feckless" --- debuted in our academic vocabulary through Elliot's example and endorsement.

Elliot simply loved to write. He relished the encounter with the yellow pad. The words began to flow almost immediately as he organized his thinking and sketched an armature for his thoughts.

The hand moved resolutely to give birth to an almost indecipherable script which challenged secretaries and editors. But the doctor's handwriting was eventually decoded and the yellow pad scribbles entered the public arena.

Pen and paper were for Elliot the source of an "aesthetic mode of knowing," both as tools of the trade and as linkages within a venerable tradition. In their simplicity and economy the pad and pen represent the values of directness, idiosyncrasy, and verisimilitude which Elliot cherished and incorporated in his work.

Eisner bent over a manuscript at his dining room table, or making metaphors in an airline seat at 30,000 miles, are indelible images of Elliot doing something from which he derived enormous satisfaction.

Francis Bacon, another bon vivant of the English language, opined that "Reading maketh a full man, conference a ready man, and writing an exact man." Elliot Eisner focused his professional life on eliciting and elucidating ideas that he believed could be significant for educational practice.

In this quest he has been full, ready, and exact in his commitment and his competence. But above all, Elliot Eisner has been artful. Elliot raised the bar high: the creation of language that dispels ignorance and myth, while promulgating insight and understanding. This became a central means by which he fashioned a professional life of high worth and consequence.

Elliot's contributions to arts education, curriculum, qualitative assessment and other fields has been paradigmatic (another Eisner favorite). But his students, colleagues, and friends have drawn out of Elliot's prodigious and influential body of work more than good ideas, more than efficient exposition.

They have also become sensitized to the power of language (and we haven't even begun to speak about images as words!) to recruit our attention and to bind our allegiance to ideas worth pondering. As Elliot once observed, "There are things that we really enjoy and want to linger over and savor and relish." Elliot Eisner needs no further elucidation.

About the author

Stephen Mark Dobbs is a graduate of Stanford where he studied with Elliot Eisner from 1968-1972. Dobbs was a professor in the humanities for 15 years at San Francisco State University, and then began a new career in philanthropy and the foundation world, serving in a variety of leadership positions. These included senior program officer at the J. Paul Getty Trust, executive director and CEO of the Koret Foundation, president of the Marin Community Foundation, and executive vice president of the Bernard Osher Foundation.

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