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Elliot Eisner Remembered

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In an effort to advocate for the arts in education, people often try to evoke strong feelings for the inclusion of the arts in the curriculum by stating: Imagine the world without art! For those of us in the arts, we simply cannot imagine a world without art.

As I reflect on Elliot Eisner's contribution to arts education, I find myself trying to imagine the world without him. For those of us in arts education, where would we be now had it not been for his educational imagination? I refer here not only to his own ability to imagine education to be greater, larger, more creative, more engaged and more important to the human spirit than most people had experienced, but also to his seminal text entitled *The Educational Imagination* (1979, 2002). Eisner had an immeasurable influence upon arts education not only in North America but, in many countries around the world.

In *The Educational Imagination*, Eisner calls for artistry in curriculum and evaluation practices. He refuses to 'teacher proof' the curriculum and instead invites educators and students to perceive their educational engagements as improvisations leading to creative problem solving. Embracing artistry, Eisner developed the ideas of educational connoisseurship and educational criticism as forms of educational assessment and program evaluation. These notions may be Eisner's greatest claims. These notions also inspired a new

generation of educators, artists and researchers to reimagine their practices as arts based educational research.

Eisner's understanding of the artistry of teaching made him a prominent speaker at educational conferences worldwide. Educators and administrators were compelled to respond to his call for imaginative practices framed through an aesthetic lens. Curriculum practices, assessment practices, and in some places, even policy practices were changing. Eisner had a profound influence upon art education around the world not only through his Presidential leadership roles within *International Society for Education through Art* (InSEA), *National Art Education Association* (NAEA) and *American Educational Research Association* (AERA), but through his convincing arguments, compelling stories of successful practices, and his own artistry as a scholar (Irwin & Reynolds, 2010).

As I think more personally, I am deeply honoured to be the 2013 recipient of the *NAEA Eisner Lifetime Achievement Award*. Previous winners include Al Hurwitz and Jerome Hausman, both of whom were very involved in the *International Society for Education through Art* and the *National Art Education Association*. Hurwitz and I share the experience of being President of InSEA with Eisner. While Eisner was also President of AERA, I was President of the *Canadian Society for Education through Art* (CSEA). I mention these points to underscore Eisner's mentoring and commitment to leadership in the field of arts education. While he made profound contributions to the American educational landscape, he made an equal or greater contribution to international art education. His writings and keynotes were always persuasive, compelling and inspirational, yet so were his personal conversations with countless art educators worldwide (Irwin, 2013). My own personal introduction to Eisner was in Calgary, Alberta at a CSEA conference in 1988 (photo can be found in Kit Grauer's article in this issue). I had just completed my doctoral program and taken a position as Assistant Professor at Lakehead University in Ontario, Canada. My doctoral supervisor introduced me to Eisner during a conference social event and what stands out in my memory was his excitement in talking with me: he genuinely inquired into my work, my experiences, my aspirations. We had a lively conversation about his work, my work, and the intersections between the two. Later, I would realize this was a hallmark of Eisner's interactions with people around the world. Over the next 25 years I would see Eisner regularly at InSEA, NAEA and AERA conferences and even taught with him one spring at an AERA ABER Institute (see Barone & Eisner, 1997). What I remember the most were the conversations. He genuinely wanted to engage with ideas and he took an active interest in those with whom he spoke.

In closing, I recently attended an "Artistic Research Conference" (January 27-30, 2014) in Granada, Spain. The chairs of the conference, Ricardo Marín-Viadel and Joaquín Roldán

wanted to offer a tribute to Elliot Eisner during the conference. They shared a photo showing them with Eisner at the New York 2002 InSEA conference.



Figure 1: *Elliot Eisner with Joaquin Roldán and Ricardo Marin-Viadel, Granada Spain at the InSEA 2002 World Congress, New York [image behind] and Joaquin Roldán and Rita Irwin in Granada, 2014 [front image taken by Ricardo Marin-Viadel] at the 2nd International Artistic Research and Arts-Based Research Conference.*

Eisner had friends around the world through his InSEA connections. The tributes at this recent conference came full circle. Eisner gifted arts education with a courage to create, an ability to think clearly about difficult topics, and the belief in an educational imagination that could transcend the seemingly endless challenges we face. He gifted all of us with insights into new horizons for our pedagogy and research, evocations into our own perceptions of art and education, and provocations into how we might reimagine our futures, especially those for our children in public schools (Uhrmacher, 2001).

You will never be forgotten Elliot. Your legacy lives on through your work and your students – and many of us consider ourselves students of you and your work, even today. Thank you for your educational imagination and all of the remarkable conversations that linger with me, and so many others, each and every day.

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About the author

Rita L. Irwin is a Professor of Art Education and Curriculum Studies, and Associate Dean of Teacher Education, at the University of British Columbia, Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada. Rita has been an educational leader for a number of provincial, national and international organizations. She is the current President of the International Society for Education through Art. Her research interests have spanned in-service art education, teacher education, socio-cultural issues, and curriculum practices across K-12 and informal learning settings. Rita is an artist, researcher, and teacher deeply committed to the arts and education. In recognition of her many accomplishments and commitments, she has received many awards for her teaching, service and scholarship including the distinction of Distinguished Fellow of the National Art Education Association in the USA, the Ted T. Aoki Award for Distinguished Service in Canadian Curriculum Studies, Canadian Art Teacher of the Year Award and the Elliot Eisner Lifetime Achievement Award (NAEA).

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