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Elliot Eisner in Memoriam

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Elliot Eisner was the most important figure in my professional life. He was my teacher in graduate courses in curriculum, my academic and dissertation adviser, chaired the search committee that recommended my name to fill the position that became my first appointment and the review committees that recommended my promotions and tenure. He was my closest colleague over thirty years of academic life and one of my closest friends. His company has been a constant pleasure that I greatly miss. But I cannot express his personal qualities in a way that others could appreciate – his energy, enthusiasm, optimism, generosity, joy in life, to mention only a few, and so I will focus on his professional accomplishments.

Elliot will be remembered by future generations of educational scholars for his fundamental and ground-breaking scholarly contributions represented in his books and scholarly articles. I will not attempt to review these here. Instead, I would like to reflect briefly on a few qualities that most inspired me and, I think, others who knew him, qualities that may not be apparent to those who know him only from his writing and speaking.

The first thing everyone noticed about Elliot was his passionate way of expressing himself in words. When he started talking on a subject close to his heart, a fountain of words would gush out, each thought suggesting another in rapid succession, expressed in perfect sentences,

covering various sides of the subject in great depth, often with citations to foundational works, all seemingly without effort, as if possessed. It worked the same way when he wrote, yellow pencil in hand and yellow legal pad in his lap, feverishly, without pause, page after page. It's as if Elliot was able to open a tap directly from his brain to his organs of expression. If he had doubts or second thoughts, they didn't interrupt the flow. His example of unbridled passion and total commitment to his train of thought, ignoring the critics within, continues to awe and inspire me.

Elliot was the most thorough and rigorous scholar of education I have known. On the first day of the first course in curriculum that I took from him, he handed out a syllabus of about twenty mimeographed (1968) pages, single spaced, the bulk of which were lists of assigned readings he had placed on two-hour reserve in the library. The list included dozens of scholarly articles, Ralph Tyler's *Basic Principles of Curriculum and Instruction*, Philip Jackson's *Life in Classrooms*, and two books by John Dewey. The readings for each topic included not just foundational pieces from the education literature, but also works from philosophy, psychology, history, or other disciplines that shed light on the topic. For instance, when we read Tyler's rationale advocating behavioral objectives, we also read an article by Frederick W. Taylor on time and motion study. Elliot wanted us to encounter the best contemporary thinking on education issues, which accounted for the appearance on his reading list of works by the likes of Suzanne Langer, Paul and Nelson Goodman, and Philip Jackson. And he wanted us to learn about the sources of contemporary ideas, which accounted for the appearance on his reading list of works by the likes of Plato, Aristotle, Rousseau, Herbert Spencer, Frederick W. Taylor, and John Dewey. A couple of years later I had the privilege of serving as Elliot's teaching assistant for this course. In reviewing the reading list I asked him whether it was reasonable to expect students to read so much in a ten week quarter. He gave me a look of incredulity and said something like 'You read this much, didn't you? I read several times this much and cut it down drastically for this list. They need to understand these matters, and this is what it takes.' Students seemed to understand. They complained to one another, but not to him, and by and large they read what he assigned.

Elliot had a deep and abiding commitment to humanity and human values that shone through everything he wrote and said. He worked to make schools places where teachers and students could live rewarding lives and begin to realize their best selves. He struggled constantly for human freedom and growth against those who would mold young people to some fixed vision of the ideal human. He thought the greatest contemporary threats to the full realization of human potential came from widespread commitment to economic productivity and efficiency, science, and technology. He spoke out repeatedly against the Procrustean madness of tailoring future generations to the supposed demands of these humanly invented enterprises.

Elliot went through life with his senses and mind wide open. He enjoyed art, music, drama, literature, fine food, and conversation. For him these were not leisure pursuits providing relief from the stresses of work, but integral parts of his life and work. His experiences of the arts were sources which fed the fountain of his productivity. He decorated his office with a Persian carpet and original works of art, many by former students. He used to visit the flea market in San Jose on Saturdays just to revel in the universality of human ingenuity. When my dissertation draft finally passed his muster, he said "Have you had lunch? No? Let's go to lunch." So we walked to his red Italian sports car, put the top down, and drove in the warm California sun to a Chinese restaurant in neighboring Mountain View that a friend of his from New York who was a connoisseur of Chinese food had recommended. Later when we were faculty colleagues I knocked on his office door one day in admissions season, carrying a stack of folders we were scheduled to discuss. As I opened the office door I almost stumbled over a large motorcycle. He chuckled at my surprise and explained that it belonged to one of the students in his class. That evening they were going to discuss connoisseurship as a form of knowing, and the student, who knew a lot about motorcycles, was going to serve as the example for the evening. These and similar experiences found their way into his work, often playing a central role.

In closing I would like to mention Elliot's courage in propounding and defending unpopular ideas in the face of near universal opposition from his colleagues at Stanford and from the wider academic community. When I first knew him, educational objectives and behaviorism were the prevailing conventional wisdom, and Elliot spoke out in favor of happenstance and the teachable moment. At Stanford, in a faculty committed to quantitative, statistical, and analytical methods, he was often a lone voice speaking in favor of qualitative modes of inquiry. In a scholarly world that valued empirical verification by means of methods inspired by the natural sciences, he pointed out that what is now proved was once only imagined, and titled his book on the design and evaluation of educational programs "The Educational Imagination." His book on research methods he titled "The Enlightened Eye: Qualitative Inquiry and the Enhancement of Educational Practice." How foolish, he seemed to say, to live our lives and teach our children based only on what we could now prove 'scientifically.' Elliot's bedrock was not science, which he saw as one of many useful and admirable human arts, but rather the body of human wisdom represented in the arts and humanities, on the one hand, and on the other hand, his own life experience and reflection. And his conviction to both was unshakeable.

These are the qualities I most admire in Elliot as a man and as a scholar. They, reflected in his work on the arts and education, make him in my estimation one of the greatest humanist scholars of education in our time, certainly the greatest I have known. We will miss his contributions, his qualities of heart and mind, and his voice.

About the author

Decker Walker is Professor Emeritus at the School of Education, Stanford University. His work has centered on curriculum questions, particularly curriculum development and curriculum policymaking. His publications include *Fundamentals of Curriculum, Curriculum and Aims, and Instructional Software* in addition to dozens of scholarly articles. Currently he lives in California and spends most of his time painting and writing.

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