

# International Journal of Education & the Arts

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

ISSN: 1529-8094

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Volume 15 Special Issue 1.21

February 28, 2014

## An “ART-spiration”

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Citation: West, D. (2014). An “ART-spiration”. *International Journal of Education & the Arts*, 15(SI 1.21). Retrieved from <http://www.ijea.org/v15si1/>.

*The arts inform as well as stimulate, they challenge as well as satisfy...This is, perhaps, the largest lesson that the arts in education can teach, the lesson that life itself can be led as a work of art. In so doing the maker himself or herself is remade. The remaking, this re-creation is at the heart of the process of education.*

*(Eisner, 1998, p.56)*

When I began my graduate school journey to better myself as an educator for my students, I immediately fell in love with the thoughtful writings of Dr. Elliot Eisner. He truly changed the way I thought about teaching, and has therefore helped me touch the lives of thousands of students over the past two decades.

In keeping this tribute short, I will showcase a lesson that came from a ‘combine’ of sorts, using the lessons of John Dewey and Elliot Eisner as well as the art of Cy Twombly that took my students learning to the next level – a level I like to call, art with purpose. I began the lesson by having my students look at the work of Cy Twombly and hoped they would be inspired by his marks. As slides of his work emerged on the large screen before them,

students were told to make marks of their own on their large sheets of white drawing paper, experiencing various media with no particular direction in mind. Their art was solely about the experience of mark making. Perhaps an excerpt from a paper I wrote in regards to this lesson will help to accentuate the initial experience a bit more:

I quickly told my students that I wanted them to feel the piece, and show me how this image inspired them. I encouraged them to go "big" and be bold - I encouraged them to explore the elements they saw and to enjoy the act of mark making with no fear of "mistake making". As they worked, the lights were dimmed and light background music played. As such, the art room took on a new feel - one filled with renewed energy - experimentation - excitement - a bit of trepidation – and slowly more art media was laid out before them at each table and they were silently dared to explore it and play with it and learn from it. From graphite sticks, thick cones of black lead in all shades of grey, a myriad of value before them, and ochre colored chalk pastels, oranges, yellows, browns and beiges - then oil pastels, more warm hues to choose from, maroon, red, pink - more chalk - and slowly simple pencils and erasers were added to the mix for fine line quality to appear. Every few minutes the next slide would appear- disturbing the student's comfort zones while pushing their creative juices as they experimented with imagery, media, and mark making with curious urgency - and finally, white paint appeared, but only 1 brush per table. "Use your fingers and feel the art" – I was energized and I was channeling Eisner and Dewey and Twombly. And, as I jumped on the tables to get better views I continued to walk around the fury of art making, I knew that this was what learning was about! (West, 2011, p. 4)

This non-objective art experience took my students to a new level of understanding art as both an informative tool and as a creative stimulator. It went beyond the direct observation lesson. When the mark making was complete, students were then told to deconstruct their papers and turn them into something new – to re-create their art by diverting it's composition, thus remaking them into new, more meaningful and personal forms of art. This art process was new to me as a visual arts teacher. It was suddenly more about my students connecting with their mark making, discovering how to make the art elements and principles work for them. The lesson became a meaningful individualized experience where the fear of failure disappeared. As the art became more personal, the energy in the room palpitated with a renewed celebration of art meeting life.

As always, Eisner's words inspired me:

The medium we choose to use affects our perception of the world. If we are to represent something through a medium, we try to find qualities of the experience or features of the world that will lend themselves to the medium we have selected. Thus, representation influences not only what we intend to express, but also what we are able to see in the first place (2002, p. 23)

This quote enticed me to take this experimental lesson to the next level. The culture of our high school is steeped in community service, so my students were encouraged to hold a Relay for Life Art Auction and put these new works in the exhibit. These art works were extensions of each of them and they wanted to give back to the community and help others, they wanted to turn this art into a purposeful experience on multiple levels. As the bids came in, my students glowed knowing that their art was touching the lives of others. Utilizing Eisner and Dewey and Twombly as their source of inspiration, they were able to make art connections that were literally life changing. They lived Eisner's words through this art experience. That first Art Auction raised over \$1000 and 7 years later it continues to grow here at North Gwinnett High School in Suwanee Georgia. Now every visual art student contributes and finds clients. Last year my students successfully raised over \$6000 for the American Cancer Society.

Elliot Eisner taught me what it is to TEACH students – authentically! I believe that I truly TEACH them now and I thank him for inspiring me to be the best that I can be, to be the life-long learner that he was and to never give up on our youth through creative curricula and strong lessons. As Eisner (1994) reminds us, "When we define the curriculum, we are also defining the opportunities the young will have to experience different forms of consciousness" (p. 44). Eisner, like Dewey, is clear that our ability to know is based in our ability to construct meaning from experiences. Schools should help children create meaning from experience, and this requires an education devoted to the senses, to meaning-making and to the imagination.

My students said it best: "It was like a day of creative therapy"(Rachel W., age 17) and "I really liked that we could paint with our fingers, it freed up the fear I have of making a mistake, I don't think I'll ever use a paint brush again cause I had complete control!" (Helen P., age 15). And perhaps their artworks say it even better (see Figures 1-4).



**Figure 1.** *Art II Students exhibiting their work in a hallway critique.*



**Figure 2.** *Teared Up Magic. Art work by Lina S. – age 16*



**Figure 3.** *In process art work by Michelle M. – age 15*



**Figure 4.** *Marks of Me. Art work by Chelsea N. – age 15*

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### About the author

Debi West, Ed.S, NBCT - has spent 21 years teaching children through the visual arts. She currently serves as the department chair of the Fine Arts program at North Gwinnett High School, Suwanee, GA. She owns the Crystal Collage Children's Art Studio and is an arts consultant for ArtsNOW and is the current elected National Art Education Association's Southeast Vice President and a past president of the Georgia Art Education Association. Debi earned her BA from the University of South Carolina, MAEd in 1999 from the University of Georgia and her Ed.S from UGA as well. She is currently a Ph.D candidate at the University of Georgia and plans on completing her dissertation in the spring of 2015. Debi is the recipient of numerous awards, including the 2012 National Art Honor Society Sponsor of the

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