

# International Journal of Education & the Arts

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## For Elliot Eisner

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My very first class on my very first day of graduate school was Elliot Eisner's 9:00 am course, *Aesthetic Foundations in Education*. One of the first texts we read was Maxine Greene's. She talked about the "shocks of awareness" the arts can create, their ability to help us envision other ways of being.

I, too, believe the arts are capable of provoking a state of wide-awakeness. As we learned in that course, the arts challenge us to imagine the world as if it were otherwise. But they are not alone in that power. In my experience, mentors with brilliant minds, expansive imaginations, and an absolute commitment to bringing up the next generation also hold that power.

In my own upbringing into educational research, it was Elliot who woke me up and transformed my view of the world.

That's not to say it was a walk in the park, being Elliot's advisee. I remember the excitement and edginess I would feel when invited into his elegant home, where I would sit in one of those upholstered chairs and let my eyes wander across all the stunning works of art and design that surrounded me. In this beautiful spot, I knew, I was about to be drilled. Elliot would sit across from me, having read some preliminary bit of analysis or final paper in a course he'd taught, and he would dig in. What did I mean by "peer critique" in the arts? How

did I choose the research sites where I'd be carrying out my ethnographic field-work? What about the relative quality of the work the kids produced? How was I accounting for that?

Looking back now, I'm pretty sure that by the time I was the one sitting in that chair, Elliot had been asking these same kinds of questions to student after student for years. And yet he made our joint investigation seem urgent and new, as if we were on the cusp of discovery. Elliot had the ability to make us, his students, believe that our work might matter in the world, because it mattered to him.

When we weren't meeting in person, Elliot prepared carefully composed multi-page essays of written feedback, printed on letterhead. (It was only much later that I learned that these carefully composed documents were actually transcribed off-the-cuff dictation — the man spoke in publishable paragraphs!)

This is one excerpt from Elliot's feedback on an early draft of my dissertation introduction:

“Thus far in your writing the overwhelming focus of your comments pertains to either the socio-linguistic context for your work or the analysis of discourse. What you have not yet done is to give the reader an educational reason for spending time and attention to the linguistic moves involved in the crits that you present.”

The point, which of course was spot-on, reminded me of something Elliot had said in class. “How does an analysis of the incidence of B flats in a Mahler symphony deepen one's understanding and appreciation of the music?” All that discourse analysis is fine, but show me why it matters for education.

That was what Elliot was always after, it seems to me now, looking back at the legacy of his ideas. How does this approach to teaching the arts, or that way of analyzing what the arts teach, or this other artistically-grounded approach to research—how does any of it deepen our understanding and appreciation? How does it help us to hear the music of teaching and learning?

Along the edge of a text that Elliot had assigned in class, I wrote this fragment, quoting one of his lectures: “Aesthetic experiences move us. If we bring the right stuff to the work, it allows us to feel in a certain way.”

Elliot helped his students to feel in a certain way. To feel like we might just have what it takes to do this thing called educational research. To feel that it was okay not to have it all figured

out just yet. To know that we had to keep pushing, keep asking, keep trying. To understand, finally, that a chance to do this kind of work was a privilege.

When I first started grad school, my instinct was to rush through as quickly as I could. I remember one time, visiting his house, bursting forth with my plans to cram in as many courses as I could in just two years so I'd finish in four. He took a deep breath and said to me, "Lissa, this might just be the only time in your life when you get some of the best minds in your field to take your work seriously. You're here to learn. *Drink deeply from the fountain.*" I can't tell you how many times I have repeated those exact words to others who are just getting started on a new and challenging experience. And how many times I've quoted those words back to myself. To remind myself to slow down and experience something. To notice its distinctive qualities. To inquire. To delight in the details. To make the most of what's here.

I think of Elliot so often, and not only when I am immersed in intellectual work. I also think about the beauty of his home. The fancy chocolate cake Ellie delivered sometime in the nineties to our night-time seminar, which coincided with an important birthday. The orange soup we shared with Ellie around their kitchen table last year. His jewelry and bright shirts. The sparkle in his eye and the way he beamed when he was on a roll.

Elliot beamed his light on so many of us. I like to imagine him now, still beaming. We'll do our best to carry that light forward from here.

### **About the author**

Elisabeth Soep (PhD, Stanford) is Senior Producer & Research Director at Youth Radio, the youth-driven production company that is NPR's official youth desk. Her collaborative media projects have won Peabody, Kennedy, and Murrow Awards. Lissa has written for academic journals (*Harvard Educational Review*, *Teachers College Record*); popular outlets (*Boing Boing*, *NPR*); and books including *Drop that Knowledge* (Soep & Chávez, UC Press), *Youthscapes* (Maira & Soep, UPenn Press), and *Participatory Politics* (MIT Press). She co-founded Youth Radio's Innovation Lab, a partnership with MIT that merges coding and storytelling. In 2011, Lissa joined the MacArthur Foundation's Youth and Participatory Politics Research Network, which explores and advances digital-age civics. For more than ten years, Lissa served on the Board of Directors of the United States' premier youth poetry organization, *Youth Speaks* (HBO series, 2009 & 2010), where she now serves as an advisor.

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