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## Elliot Eisner as Educator<sup>1</sup>

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Elliot Eisner is an educator. Indeed, he is one of the few genuine educators that I know. In this essay I want to explain this claim. In addition, I want to pay tribute to a person from whom I have learned much and whose company I have enjoyed for 30 years—ever since we first rubbed shoulders as advisors to a Television Arts Project.

When I speak of an educator what do I mean? An educator is not the same as a teacher, nor an expert on educational policy, nor a disciplinary scholar who happens to teach at a School of Education. Rather, an educator is a person who has deep and rounded knowledge of the processes of education and who embodies that knowledge in his or her own professional life. Fundamental to being a good educator is being a good teacher in the classroom. With his deep knowledge of several subjects, his interdisciplinary cast of mind, his extraordinary eloquence, his capacity to engage students in dialogue, and his concern about the development of his

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<sup>1</sup> This essay was previously published in 2004 in B. Uhrmacher, & J. Matthews (Eds.), *Intricate palette: Working the ideas of Elliot Eisner*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson. It is reprinted here with permission from the author.

students, Elliot Eisner is an exemplary teacher.

However, an educator's skills go beyond expertise in the classroom. An educator needs to be knowledgeable about three disparate areas of knowledge. The educator needs to understand the nature of the learning process: how the human mind develops, what its potentials are, and how it can be fashioned along certain lines. Turning from the learner to the teacher, the educator must understand the nature of pedagogy, the development of curriculum, and the ways in which learning can be assessed. Finally, an educator needs to be cognizant of the larger forces that affect any educational system beyond home schooling: the political currents, the economic constraints, the processes at work in the broader society, the ambient culture, and the global context. Among those of us who populate the world of education, Elliot Eisner stands out for his extraordinary grasp of these various facets and how they work—all too often, fail to work—together.

Of course, even a polymath like Elliot Eisner must have areas of special expertise. Since I first encountered Elliot in the area of arts education, I tend to think of his focus as the arts, and particularly the visual arts. (But right away I remember how well he has written about literature and about hybrid arts, like the movies.) Yet a case could be made that Elliot is equally focused on curriculum, on pedagogy, and on qualitative assessment; and that he approaches educational issues with the analytic skills of the philosopher, the rhetorical skills of the lawyer, the sensitivity of the artistic connoisseur, and a “knowledge at his fingertips” (Fingerspitzgefuehl) of the relevant social science literature—psychology, sociology, cultural anthropology. And while the mind of educator looms large in these various settings, Elliot can more than hold his own in company where no one knows (or even cares) about educational issues.

Though our education and our styles are quite different, I find myself in agreement with 95% of what Elliot has said and written in the area of education. Typically, he was there first. He has always been sensitive to the different ways of knowing of which human beings are capable. He has understood equally well the role of different kinds of culturally devised symbol systems in capturing knowledge and truths about the world. He has been skeptical of the scientism and quantification that is imposed, often inappropriately, on the curriculum and the classroom. He has appreciated the role of connoisseurship in evaluating classrooms, curricula, and the cultures of school. And he has been perhaps the leading figure in the world in arguing for the legitimate role of artistic expression and knowledge in the classrooms and the experience of each child. We might say that he has mastered the language of Susanne Langer, given John Dewey his due, and extracted what is good from the often-opaque Nelson Goodman.

Not surprisingly, I remember vividly two areas in which we have disagreed. Interestingly, both of the areas of our disagreement have centered on the role of the disciplines in the arts; and both have had their paradoxical facets. Elliot has been more of an enthusiast than I for an arts education that is discipline-based—the form of arts education that was promulgated for two decades by the Getty Center for Education in the Arts. My hesitation with this program had to do with its recommendation that children study the disciplines of art history, art criticism, and aesthetics. My own feeling has been that, before college (or senior high school), the precious time allowed for the arts should be reserved primarily for activities that are distinct from the verbal-analytic bias of school—the making of art. The paradox here is that Elliot began life as a painter, where my involvement in all arts save music has been chiefly as an audience member. Moreover, in most of my writings, I have been an ardent defender of the traditional discipline, while Elliot is more sympathetic to postmodern skepticism about disciplinary boundaries.

The second area has been our disagreement about the requirements for a doctoral dissertation in education. Elliot has been open to the idea that educators should be allowed to submit works of art—and, specifically novels—as a fulfillment of the requirement for the doctorate. I have resisted this idea. I argue that the doctoral degree is an academic achievement and that the dissertation should be an instance of an academic discipline—usually an analytic discipline like philosophy or one of the social sciences. I have argued, further, that the criteria for evaluating a novel are necessarily different from those entailed in evaluating a piece of scholarship—we can't block a well-researched novel just because we don't like its aesthetic properties, nor should we award a degree to a novel that is artistically effective but based on faulty logic or inaccurate data. (For Elliot's side of the story, see his essay titled "Viewpoints: Should Novels Count as Dissertations in Education?" in *Research on the Teaching of English*, December 1996.) But again, there paradox lurks. In his view of arts education, Elliot defends the disciplines. And it is I, with my theory of multiple intelligences, who might be expected to be more sympathetic to a work of art as a culminating performance in graduate school.

I have a word of advice for those who would disagree with Elliot. Get your arguments straight and practice your rhetoric! Elliot is expert on both dimensions. I have no doubt that if he had decided to be a lawyer, he would be able to bill hours at an astronomic rate. Whether on the strength of his arguments, or in spite of their flaws, Elliot always wins the debates. I must add that he is very gracious—and that I would rather lose a debate to him and learn something, than have the opposite outcome with a less able adversary.

I trust it is clear that I hold Elliot Eisner in extremely high regard as a colleague and friend. I recommend him on both counts. But in saluting Elliot Eisner, I have in mind a broader message for all of us who elect to traffic in the world of education. The field of education

cannot and should not be restricted to classroom teachers; nor should it be restricted to those who have mastered a discipline but happen to have found themselves in a Department or School of Education. Just as those who are in public policy or public health should exhibit a special blend of skills and knowledge, so, too, those who call themselves educators should be in possession of a unique set of skills and a defined area of knowledge. Elliot Eisner belongs to that small group that fully merits the descriptor *Educator*. His inspiring example has already swelled the ranks of educators and will continue to do so for many years to come.

### **About the author**

Howard Gardner is the Hobbs Professor of Cognition and Education at the Harvard Graduate School of Education and Senior Director of Harvard Project Zero. Among numerous honors, Gardner received a MacArthur Prize Fellowship in 1981 and the Prince of Asturias Award for Social Sciences in 2011. He has received honorary degrees from twenty-nine colleges and universities. In 2005 and again in 2008, he was selected by Foreign Policy and Prospect magazines as one of the 100 most influential public intellectuals in the world. The author of twenty-nine books translated into thirty-two languages, and several hundred articles, Gardner is best known in educational circles for his theory of multiple intelligences, a critique of the notion that there exists but a single human intelligence that can be assessed by standard psychometric instruments. He has also written extensively on creativity, leadership, professional ethics, and the arts. His latest book, *The App Generation: How Today's Youth Navigate Identity, Intimacy, and Imagination in a Digital World*, was published in October 2013.

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