

International Journal of Education & the Arts

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

ISSN: 1529-8094

Volume 15 Special Issue 1.6

February 28, 2014

Elliot Eisner: A Canadian Perspective and Personal Tribute

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Citation: Grauer, K. (2014). Elliot Eisner: A Canadian perspective and personal tribute. *International Journal of Education & the Arts*, 15(SI 1.6). Retrieved from <http://www.ijea.org/v15si1/>.

In the 1970's there was money in Education in British Columbia. New legislation brought in class size limitations and hundreds of new teachers were hired. School districts opened Supervisor of Instruction jobs in the Arts and I was lucky enough to have just finished my first Masters and found myself the Visual Art Supervisor for a Vancouver area school district. With the new positions came new advocacy organizations and we initiated the Arts in Education Advisory board and the BC Arts Administrators group. The Music Supervisor in Vancouver had just returned from a music conference in the United States and he was raving about this great keynote speaker from Stanford University- Elliot Eisner.



Figure 1. *Elliot Eisner – Stanford University in the 70's*

Knowing little other than I had funds for a conference, I phoned Stanford and spoke to Elliot about coming to Vancouver to speak. I was so naive that I didn't realize that I should have been far more in awe of the man. He was as gracious then as he was in subsequent years and all the legendary stories about his speaking and writing ability were confirmed. This would be the first of many speaking engagements that he would make to Canada over the next 5 decades. Elliot was an incredible speaker. He brought a masterful command of intellectual rigor and timing to his speeches that kept the audience engaged at an emotional and cognitive level. Once someone experienced an Eisner lecture, the word spread quickly, he was a master. San Francisco is an hour and a half plane ride from Vancouver and Elliot would joke that he could keynote a conference and be back to Stanford to teach an evening class.



Figure 2. *Elliot keynoting*



Figure 3. *With Graeme Chalmers, Rita Irwin and I in Calgary, Canada.*

As Ron MacGregor once quipped, Elliot spent so much time in Canada, helping Superintendents, Principals, Teachers and Arts Educators advocate for the arts in education, he was thought of as an Honorary Canadian.

During one NAEA in Chicago, I looked up from my presentation to see Elliot in the room. Afterward (and yes, I was totally shaken), he asked if I would consider coming to Stanford to do a PhD. He only took one doctoral student a year in art education and he wanted me to be sure that I understood what that might mean. During that conference he had me meet with Steven Dodds to give one side of the Stanford experience and another former student (who was not so complimentary) to give the other side. I was hooked. I wrote the Graduate Student Entrance exams in the summer and took a leave from my school district to start classes at Stanford in January.



Figure 4. *Stanford University.*

My experiences at Stanford helped me to understand Elliot Eisner, the mentor.



Figure 5. *Elliot, Lenin and Sylvia Feinburg*



Figure 6. *Elliot and Ellie in Taiwan with Brent Wilson, Michael Parsons, Ann Kuo, Anna Kindler, Michael Day and a host of other art educators*

Elliot's influence was such that I had the opportunity to interact with academics that I had read but never realized I would get to meet. Elliot hosted graduate seminars and events in his home to ensure the doctoral students would not only interact with exciting educational ideas but would become life long colleagues. It was there that we all realized what an incredibly supportive bond there was between Elliot and Ellie and how privileged we were to be part of their lives. As life would have it, an education crisis was happening at home so I returned to my job without completing my PhD but at least finishing a second Masters. Elliot was not

pleased to see me go but was extremely supportive. I know he was partially responsible in my achieving my faculty position in art education at my first Alma Mater, UBC. He also continued that support when I went to Simon Fraser to complete the doctoral degree and he served as my external.



Figure 7. *My PhD dream team- Elliot Eisner, Marv Westrom, Ron MacGregor and Peter Grimmet*

When he was elected President of the International Society for Education through Art, he asked me to join the executive in the Treasurer and Membership position. InSEA was \$500 in the red and we had almost no idea who our paid members really were. He confided to me later that being President of NAEA or AERA were cake walks in comparison to our struggles to bring InSEA back to life. He not only gave his full support to InSEA as an intellectual organization, he procured funds for an evaluation conference and book to help offset expenses and convinced NAEA to sponsor World Councillors to conferences with InSEA meetings.



Figures 8. *InSEA Executive in France, 1991.*



Figures 9. John Steers (UK), Iren Wojnar (Poland), Elliot Eisner (USA), Kit Grauer (Canada), Marie-Francoise Chavanne (France), Larry Kantner (USA).

Elliot was the first InSEA President to support an African InSEA Congress and made sure that a highly influential Latin American woman- Ana Mae Barbosa, was nominated to succeed him. He understood that InSEA had to have support outside of the North America and Europe to really be an international organization.



Figure 10. Vesta Daniel, Graeme Chalmers and Monique Briere with Elliot in Lagos, Nigeria.

Throughout the years Elliot continued his mentoring role. Often at NAEA and AERA conferences, we went out to dinner with the Eisners and other former graduate students and always there was the Stanford party at AERA, where we could meet his new graduate students and he ours. I was nominated to the Council for Policy Studies, an organization he founded and still meets prior to NAEA. He keynoted my first museum institute without any compensation, he so believed in the idea of close contact between art teachers and museum educators. Whether at international conferences around the world or at his home, Elliot always made time to talk about ideas in the arts and education, ask questions and really listen to what folks had to say. As he said to my husband Peter Scurr, a high school art teacher for 38 years, “you can’t get the same gratification that you get as an art teacher from selling shoes.” Elliot Eisner was not only a legend, he was a man that made such a difference to our understanding of what the arts can mean in education and how to be a generous and caring mentor to his art education “family”.



Figure 11. *Elliot at home after an Arts Based conference*



Figure 12. *Elliot presenting at Ron MacGregor’s retirement from UBC.*

About the author

Kit Grauer is Professor Emerita in Art Education at the University of British Columbia. She remains actively involved in art education organizations at the local, national, and international levels and continues her arts based research through two major Canadian research grants. Dr. Grauer's interests include arts-based and image-based research, international issues in art education, digital media and youth, museum education, and art teacher education. She published and has given numerous presentations, in-service sessions, and keynote speeches in these areas. Her awards include the NAEA/BC Art Educator Award; the NAEA Pacific Region Art Education Award; the UBC Killam Teaching Excellence Award; the UBC Alma Mater Society "Just Desserts" award; the CSEA Gaitskell Award, InSEA Honorary Life Member, CSEA Honorary Life Member, UBC Sam Black Award for Education and Development in the Arts, USSEA Ziegfeld International Award, AERA Award for Best Publication in an Electronic Journal, George Cedric Metcalf Foundation Award for Excellence in Research, UBC Murray Elliot Award for Teacher Education, MICA Master Teacher Award, BCATA Higher Education Teacher of the Year, NAEA Fellow, the Canadian Art Educator of the Year, the NAEA Higher Education Teacher of the Year and the June King McFee Award.

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