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## Elliot Eisner and an Education in Connections

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The arts inform as well as stimulate, they challenge as well as satisfy. Their location is not limited to galleries, concert halls and theatres. Their home can be found wherever humans chose to have attentive and vita intercourse with life itself. 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.

- Elliot Eisner 1998: 56

Ultimately there are but two philosophies. One of them accepts life and experience in all its uncertainty, mystery, doubt, and half-knowledge and turns that experience upon itself to deepen and intensify its own qualities—to imagination and art. This is the philosophy of Shakespeare and Keats.

- John Dewey, 1934: 41

In those first few weeks of class, I found myself quickly disoriented. Beyond the fact that I had moved across the country to start a new adventure as a doctoral student to study with Elliot Eisner at Stanford University, my disorientation was due to new forms of thinking about curriculum, pedagogy, and research. Elliot had stated that curricular choices were political and that curriculum is, and always has been, theorized, comprised of competing educational philosophies about what it means to teach or reform educational policy and practice. I paraphrase that statement now, as I heard it nearly 15 years ago, but it changed my view of curriculum as something one *does* in a classroom or educational setting to how one *inhabits* a classroom, and everything I had naively apprehended about curriculum studies was disrupted.

For Elliot Eisner, a theory of curriculum included a vision and version of education that involved artistry. Artistry, according to Elliot, was not necessarily located in art studios, art classrooms, or with professional artists themselves. This vision meant conceiving of schooling broadly, thinking of school as a culture in the sense of a shared way of life but also, as he espoused, as a medium for the creation of our selves. Elliot argued that, cognitively, the arts function to “liberate us from the literal,” dispose us to tolerate ambiguity, and “stabilize what would otherwise be evanescent.” (2002, pp. 10-11). He envisioned education reform not as a system of measurable outcomes but as a system that might embrace the artist’s studio or a scientist’s innovative laboratory as the model for classroom environments. The forms of teaching and learning that we would find in such environments include materials and materiality as pedagogical encounters, the teaching of form in relationship to content, the exercise of imagination, the world framed aesthetically so as to encourage our capacity to be moved, and flexible purposing, John Dewey’s (1934) term to describe the shifting of process and aims with the work at hand.

Elliot’s views allowed me to see the ways in which materials teach. I came to understand that the mirror image of curriculum is not subject matter, but pedagogy. In practice, they reflect each other, are one and the same image, the same event. This shift in perspective influenced my dissertation study as well as my future research, in which I continue to account for and theorize curriculum and pedagogy as lived and enacted. The idea of flexible purposing, in particular, has continued to inform my views of educational purposing: the surrender to process, surprise, and unanticipated qualities of experience; and the value of contingencies rather than predetermined goals.

In one of my favorite graduate courses, *Aesthetic Foundations of Education*, Elliot encouraged us to read, discuss, and explore what it meant to embrace art as a way of thinking and being in the world and the ways in which life itself can be lead as a work of art. The arts, Elliot wrote, provide “a way of creating our lives by expanding our consciousness, shaping our dispositions, satisfying our quest for meaning, establishing contact with others, and

sharing a culture” (2002, p. 3). Drawing inspiration from the philosophical works of John Dewey, and primarily from *Art as Experience* (1938), and of Maxine Greene, Herbert Reed, Suzanne Langer, Philip Jackson, and David Ecker, Elliot guided us through the qualities of thought evoked through art-making or art-perceiving that could contribute to the educational goals of schooling as well to those of research. I was particularly moved to think about the implications of what he called “aesthetic modes of knowing” (Eisner, 1985), which held referential and consummatory functions – the importance of non-discursive, abstract, and/or sensory knowing, as well as the joy and satisfaction of inquiry itself—that Elliot felt were critical to education. He argued that attending to the aesthetic aspects of subject matter might raise student awareness of the ways in which ideas are humanly crafted, and to how they also might become makers of knowledge as they explore, modulate, and give shape to forms of experience. It is a vision that he created to confront, directly and intentionally, widely held conceptions of knowledge.

Elliot was interested in questioning deeply held assertions about the nature of disciplinary practices in professional and academic fields, and his delineation of aesthetic modes of knowing recognized the presence of the aesthetic in all activities. My very first assignment as his advisee and research assistant was to study the role of artistry in the practice of social science research. Elliot wanted to confront the assumption that art and science were separate endeavors: How, he wanted to ask, might artistic considerations function in social science? At the time of this research study, I was fairly new to the doctoral program. As I sat with Elliot and our social scientist participants for lengthy, in-depth interviews about their processes, I was enthralled by Elliot’s interview style: A few well-phrased questions would be asked: “What’s it like for you to have formulated a concern, recognized a possibility, but to not yet have a study?” “Where are the satisfactions and frustrations located in your work?” “What is the basis upon which you edit?” “How, if at all, is somatic knowledge used to make decisions?” And what followed would be a deep discussion about the personal side of a scientist’s work. We talked with an education policy researcher, an archeologist, a historian, a psychotherapist, a cognitive scientist, a bio-behavioral scientist, an educational psychologist, as well as many others residing at the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences at Stanford University, and with every interview, I found myself immersed in stories of artistry in research: equating quantitative analysis with baroque fugal analysis; visualizing data through the creation of mobiles and sculptures; creating an image as a way to move static numbers or other data into a more complete, fluid picture; creating a dramatic structure for the writing process; creating aesthetic satisfaction with one’s work environment; hearing the rightness of fit during the editing process. Elliot encouraged me to work alongside him on that study as a colleague and co-author (Eisner & Powell, 2002), allowing me to give shape to my ideas alongside his own, pushing me to develop my own scholarly ideas about the ways in which the art of, and in, everyday life was embedded in process, method, and form.

To be comfortable with ambiguity, experimentation, non-discursive forms of thought, and somatic knowledge: this is what I learned from Elliot. Shortly after learning of his passing, I went through my coursework files from my days at Stanford, reading through Elliot's comments on the papers I had written for him. I read comments that were intended to challenge and push me further, indications of where my arguments needed solidification, depiction, and interpretation. For how and why the arts matter for education. I found a course paper that seemed to resonate with him. As part of a long and encouraging typed response to a paper I had written about music pedagogy, performance, and their implications for general school assessment practices, he had written: "Keep making connections." To experience and embrace the liminal, the sensory, and the "what-if": this is what I carry forward from Elliot's work into my own writings and teachings.



**Figure 1.** *Graduation Day, 2003. The author with Elliot Eisner*

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### **About the author**

Kimberly Powell is Associate Professor of programs in Language, Culture, and Society and Art Education at The Pennsylvania State University. Concerned with art as an interdisciplinary site of study, her scholarship focuses on arts integration, artistic practice and performance as critical forms of social change, and the production of cultural meanings through the body and the senses. She studied with Elliot Eisner at Stanford University's Graduate School of Education from 1997-2003.

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