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Elliot Eisner: An Appreciation

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What comes to mind first is that in the early 1950's Elliot was Lee Shulman's youth adviser and basketball coach at the Jewish People's Institute on Douglas Boulevard in the North Lawndale neighborhood of Chicago, a neighborhood where in the 1920's Golda Meier had been one of the residents. Lee and his friends were yeshiva students—he says that they were better at the Talmud than at basketball. (About ten years later I was in that same part of town doing youth work. By then the neighborhood was 98% African American. As in Elliot's case, my experience with youth work got me into education as a profession.)

When I began to read Elliot's writing about educational research in the 1970's he seemed to be down on ethnography, contrasting that to his own focus on aesthetics and "connoisseurship." I was very taken with his notion of connoisseurship. Having started out as a musician myself I could see how the judgments of someone who really knew a set of practices in detail — whether they were the practices of painting, or of wine-making, or of carpentry, or of music — could be not only rigorous but substantively, hermeneutically relevant, honing in on small differences in form that made big differences in meaning and significance. So much conventional educational research had strained for rigor without bothering with substantive, interpretive relevance — without a "sense of the game" that an insider has as a practitioner. But I still wondered, "What does Eisner have against

ethnography in educational inquiry?” It seemed to me that he was making a distinction without a difference.

Later I realized that I had been naïve and that Eisner was onto something important — he had been reacting to the whiffs of scientism and colonialism that ethnography was giving off, which derived from its earliest practice during the beginning days of anthropology — observational study that had more than a bit of the elitist ethos of the field biologist, who shot and killed research subjects in order to dissect them (without asking them for informed consent). Eisner’s intense allergic reaction to the scientific character of conventional educational research methods and theory even extended to ethnography, and I came to see that there was a certain rightness in that. As the 1980’s progressed ethnography was intensely critiqued from within anthropology and as an anthropologist of education I also had become more and more dissatisfied with it. In my own work I gravitated toward participatory action research and I reconnected with my earlier formation in arts-based judgments about meaning making. Moreover, as I began to meet Eisner at academic gatherings I came to appreciate him for his humanity. At one point after I had experienced a major professional disappointment he showed great kindness in going out of his way — literally pulling me aside in a hallway — to compliment me and my work, in a private moment.

My most vivid memory of him in public comes from his compelling Presidential Address at an annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association. He reviewed the notions of connoisseurship and observed that much of what is important in teaching and learning is incommensurable; educational experiences cannot be measured simply and repeatedly, on the unitary yardstick of ordinary psychometrics. To support that argument he showed slides of paintings and discussed the unique properties of each, and then in a culminating example he quoted from a poem which carries a special resonance that eludes educational measurement. What does it mean to have learned to know and love the concluding lines of Tennyson’s “Ulysses?” he asked, and then recited those lines. In them Ulysses speaks as an old man. I remembered this years later, after I was older and had come to appreciate the courage it takes to persist as strength wanes. With full attribution of Elliot’s use of this poem I repeated it in a speech in which I was urging reading researchers to adopt a broader vision of what I was calling “real reading.” I said that we need to think of learning to read with insight and commitment as a project that develops across an entire lifetime, not something that can adequately be measured at the end of a single unit of instruction or at the end of a single academic year, or by the “Gold Standard” of a field trial with randomized assignment to treatment and control groups. And so in concluding my speech I did as Elliot had done, repeating the words of Tennyson:

...Come my friends,
'Tis not too late to seek a newer world.
Push off, and sitting well in order smite
The sounding furrows, for my purpose holds
To sail beyond the sunset...
Though much is taken, much abides; and though
We are not now that strength which in old days
Moved earth and heaven; that which we are, we are.
One equal temper of heroic hearts,
Made weak by time and fate, but strong in will
To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield.

Pace, Elliot. Thank you for sailing beyond the sunset toward a newer world and for carrying educational imagination there, past former horizons. Thank you for your striving, seeking, finding — so strong in will, never yielding.

About the author

Frederick Erickson is George F. Kneller Professor of Anthropology of Education Emeritus and Professor of Applied Linguistics Emeritus at the University of California, Los Angeles. A specialist in the use of video analysis in interactional sociolinguistics and microethnography, his publications include (with Jeffrey J. Shultz) “The counselor as gatekeeper: Social interaction in interviews” (1982), and “Talk and social theory (2004) (which received the American Educational Research Association’s Outstanding Book Award in 2005). He has also written extensively on qualitative methods in educational and social research. In 1998-99 and again in 2006-07 Erickson was a Fellow at the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences, Stanford, CA. He is an elected Fellow of the National Academy of Education and of the American Educational Research Association. In 2014 the Council on Anthropology and Education of the American Anthropological Association named its annual Outstanding Dissertation Award in his honor.

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