



The Classroom as Studio—The Studio as Classroom

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ABSTRACT

In this article a studio approach to teaching is examined. Based on her own pedagogical experience, the author shows how the “classroom as studio” and “studio as classroom” become a home for rich learning both within and beyond the classroom walls. She observes that through the skills, work ethic, processes, and discipline inherent to the arts, students develop the competencies that transfer easily across disciplines. Further, she demonstrates that the creative and natural language of movement and dance, in conjunction with a supportive studio atmosphere, can serve as a strong pedagogical equalizer that enables each student to flourish in an uninhibited way.

When I look back at my school days, one thing is abundantly clear: some of my most memorable experiences are those that nurtured my creativity and self-expression. For many of us, it is the moments spent participating in extracurricular activities that have left their most profound mark on us as individuals. The teachers we remember most are those who took the time and effort to get to know us. They encouraged us to strive for our full potential by acknowledging our talents and abilities and allowing us to incorporate them into our learning. Those are the lessons we remember most, and that is the legacy that great teachers leave with us.

Think of the young child, so curious, bubbling with a rich imagination and a sense of wonder and awe as she learns about the world around her. Somehow, though, once a child enters school we witness a steady decline in curiosity, imagination and

creativity. How sad it is to see the demise of creativity in favor of compliance to the rigid confines of school culture and curriculum. As Gardner (1982) surmises:

The preschool years are often described as a golden age of creativity, a time when every child sparkles with artistry. As those years pass, however, it seems that a kind of corruption takes over, so that ultimately most of us mature into artistically stunted adults. When we try to understand the development of creativity—asking why some people finally emerge as artists, while the vast majority do not—the evidence for some corrupting force is persuasive, at least on the surface. Step into almost any nursery school and you enter a world graced with the imagination and inventiveness of children. Some youngsters are fashioning intricate structures out of blocks. Others are shaping people, animals, or household objects out of clay or Play-Doh. Listen to the singing: there are melodic fragments, familiar tunes, and other patterns composed of bits and snatches from many songs. As the children speak, you hear the narratives they weave and their charming figures of speech. (p. 86)

As I ponder about my thirty years as a teacher, I realize that I am extremely fortunate to have been in a career that has afforded me the opportunity to fulfill my intellectual as well as my creative and imaginative abilities. I always tell student teachers that teaching is a profession that must seek to foster creativity by awakening fundamental curiosity, imagination, and most of all, love of learning. We must recognize the innate talents and abilities of our students and provide them with multiple opportunities to explore those talents through various experiences such as those offered in the arts. Dewey (1938) regards the arts as “refined and intensified forms of experience” (p. 9). Such experiences encourage students to reflect and become more deeply engaged in their own learning, nurturing critical thinking skills and inspiring the creative process. If students are to create meaning from their lived experience and achieve long-term understanding, they must become active participants in their own learning. They need to feel that their interests and abilities are being addressed. They need to have their imaginations ignited. Eisner underlines the integral role of the arts in this process:

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 choose to have attentive and vital intercourse with life itself. This is, perhaps, the largest 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. (Eisner, 1998, p. 56)

Educational theorists, such as Vygotsky (1999), Piaget (1955), and Bruner (1966), emphasize the important role of social interaction in learning and the need to provide for many modes of learning and expression. Gardner's theory of multiple intelligence (1983) acknowledges that learners are all very different and that intelligence cannot be measured solely with traditional tools. Rather, he asserts, we should take into account innate affinities we all possess. Talents and abilities are as diverse as the students who possess them. Gardner suggests that five types of cognitive minds should be cultivated: the disciplined mind--what we gain from applying ourselves in a disciplined way in school; the synthesizing mind--what we gain from surveying a wide range of sources and deciding what is important and worth keeping; the creating mind--the part of us that looks for new ideas and practices, innovates, takes chances and discovers; the respectful mind--the mind that tries to understand and form relationships with other human beings; and the ethical mind--the mind that broadens the respect for others into something more abstract and asks "what kind of person, worker and citizen do I want to be?" (Gardner, 2006). He asserts that teachers have the responsibility to recognize those talents in our students and to nurture those "intelligences" within the classroom.

The Classroom as Studio

One of the key ways to solicit self-expression and creativity within the classroom is through the integration of the arts across the disciplines. It has occurred to me that I have always, whether I was teaching Moral and Religious Instruction or English Language Arts, incorporated a variety of different art forms in my classroom. Somehow, I instinctively recognized that all of my students, from the shy and introverted to the boisterous and extroverted, thrived on exploring their artistic leanings. Lessons and concepts came alive within the vehicle of artistic expression. In this way my classroom became a studio.

In my English classes I have always used a variety of art forms to interpret works of literature, especially Shakespeare, works that are often daunting for contemporary students. Once they are given the opportunity through the various art mediums, namely, music, drama, visual art, and dance, to make Shakespeare their own, student attitudes change completely. They discover a deep appreciation and

love for Shakespeare's works. In Moral and Religious Instruction the use of visual art, music, drama, and dance also strengthen their learning. The same can be said across the disciplines. Eisner (2004) suggests that the important interdisciplinary role of the arts in teaching and learning should lead us to new and different models of how we view education:

It may be that by shifting the paradigm of education reform and teaching from one modeled after the clocklike character of the assembly line into one that is closer to the studio or innovative science laboratory might provide us with a vision that better suits the capacities and the futures of the students we teach. It is in this sense, I believe, that the field of education has much to learn from the arts about the practice of education. It is time to embrace a new model for improving our schools. (Eisner, 2004, p. 3)

I have found that when I use the studio approach to studying Shakespeare or other literary works, students are less prone to substitute reading of classic works of literature with other forms of media. That is, they are less prone to wanting to "see the movie" than "reading the book." Initially, I encounter a fair amount of resistance to Shakespeare's work. The only students who are excited about it are those who have been in my class before. The students who think that studying Shakespeare is boring are those who have read and answered questions on the plays rather than "experienced" them. These students are always rather puzzled by their more enthusiastic peers. At this point I should explain that my main goal in studying Shakespeare is for students to enjoy the play and to bring a part of who they are into the performance. I then ask the students to reveal their talents, especially talents they may have been reticent to express with their peers. Many of them are anxious to divulge a love for something that, previously, had no place in the classroom. I am always so impressed with the wide range of talents shared. Had I not solicited this information, I would have had no knowledge of the existence of this rich and diverse repertoire of talent by which students could participate, generate excitement, and foster critical thinking and meaning making. The students and I incorporate and build on these talents, creating a unique production, one that helps them to experience Shakespeare in a way that is meaningful to them. Through this experience I hope my students come to understand that Shakespeare's themes are relevant to contemporary lives; that literature is timeless and universal; and, that it is a form of communication that helps us understand ourselves and our humanity.

An important dimension in the studio classroom is to establish a safe and secure environment for risk taking. I want my students to feel comfortable about

opening themselves up to a multitude of opportunities and ways to express themselves. While teaching English over the years, I have discovered that some students experience a general disconnect with school because they perceive it to be outside the realm of their daily lives. In one instance, I was teaching a grade seven English class in which the students were struggling with the concepts of symbolism and imagery. I decided that I would have the students create their own symbolic representation of themselves. For homework, all students were required to search for a rock that appealed to them. They were to use the rock as a canvas on which to paint only symbols and images to represent who they were as individuals. They were directed to choose a color scheme which best evoked the feelings and mood they wished to impart. The rock had to profoundly embody who they were and what was at the heart of their beliefs about themselves.

The students embraced the project with tremendous enthusiasm and began the serious and complex process of brainstorming and experimenting with signs, symbols, and paint color to convey their message in a poignant way. It was fascinating to witness both the level of engagement and the thought processes that went into the creation of each piece. Upon completion, the students had an opportunity to analyze each other's rocks and to painstakingly take notes about each one. Then they shared what they interpreted from each work. It was amazing to see how the students began to understand the significance of each visual symbol represented on the rocks, the process behind each construction, and the choice of color enhancing the aesthetic qualities of each creation. As a final step, the students divulged the meaning of what they had inscribed on their rocks and why. Students reflected on the process and shared what the experience had revealed to them about who they were. From that point on the students were more aware of the use of symbols and images in literature and, indeed, in all works of art. Experiencing these concepts in a safe environment was a critical component of the learning process.

The Studio as Classroom

The dance course I teach is one of the four arts options offered within the Quebec Education Program (2007), the provincial curriculum. All students choose an art option each year in high school (drama, dance, music or art). To graduate they must pass their chosen art option in grade ten (Secondary Cycle Two, Year Two); however, they may experience a range of options throughout their school years. This means that each class is usually comprised of students at varying levels of experience

and ability. Some students, in fact, are not given their preferred option and so my role as a teacher is to encourage students to be open to new challenges.

I have always strongly believed that dance has the potential of being a great “educational equalizer.” Love of dance is a shared experience since movement is a nonverbal language through which all students can express themselves regardless of their abilities in using more conventional languages. Dancing encourages risk taking, often creating a bond of trust and sharing within the classroom. Upon entering a dance studio all other thoughts can be left behind as students focus on the physical and creative demands of this art form. Within this dynamic, the class can, and often does, become one coherent “ensemble” group working together. The divisiveness of cliques, often found in the high school milieu, can be avoided. I believe that one of the most important roles for a teacher in the act of teaching is to model the behavior we seek to nurture within our classroom environment. For this reason, I find myself exhibiting on a daily basis acceptance, encouragement, discipline, perfection of my craft, articulation of constructive feedback, analysis and reflection, repetition and revision. I am often a learner as well as a teacher, and am anxious to learn from my students and to share my own learning experiences with them. From this, the students see that I am comfortable learning from my mistakes and that I am willing to learn and be taught, as well as teach.

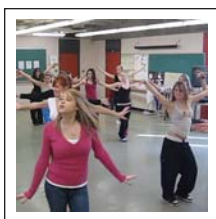
As a result, there have been so many delightful surprises. Many of my students have never had any formal dance training. In an age where hip-hop has become all the rage, I have had the task of encouraging them to explore other dance forms such as ballet, lyrical, jazz, contemporary, interpretive, Latin and hip-hop. I have been delighted to see how excited students become as they begin to examine their own identity and experiment with raw movement to best articulate who they are. There have been many moving moments as I observe my students in their journey of self-discovery. I watch as the students begin to experiment with movement and share that with their peers and me. The shy, introverted students begin to take a more prominent role within the classroom dynamic, while the extroverted students begin to accept this shift by accepting the contributions of others. A delicate balance is achieved, which allows all of the students to respect what they can learn from others. Learning is tangible and overt as I witness the creation of choreography through the methodical execution of movement and through the use of imagination to impart a powerful message from each student in the class. There is a determination and tenacity in discovering an inner voice, that has often never had the opportunity to be heard, by embodying it into a carefully selected sequence of movements, to convey a meaningful story to the audience. Students in the class have an equal opportunity to

succeed and are given a great deal of encouragement and support by their peers to do so. This cooperation contributes to the classroom tone of acceptance and inclusion. This experience solidifies my belief that teacher modeling is one of the most powerful means of communication and learning.

Reciprocity of teaching and learning is another dimension that can serve as a powerful educational equalizer in the dance studio. I always encourage students to share their knowledge and talents with others. I model the behavior first by learning from students who are proficient in a dance style that is outside my own repertoire of knowledge. This practice helps students become open and receptive to being taught by peers. (The following video clips show students alternatively teaching and learning from each other: Swing 1, Swing 2, Hip-hop 1, Hip-hop 2.) In addition to my own suggestions, the feedback that is sought and given by their peers helps to fine-tune the choreography so that it evolves into a more powerful and significant form of expression and message making. The classroom becomes a level playing field as students take risks and learn to solve problems both individually and as a group. Despite academic or physical challenges, students are accepted with warmth, mutual respect, and consideration contributing profoundly to the building of self-esteem within and, ultimately, outside of, the classroom.



> SWING 1



> SWING 2



> HIP-HOP 1



> HIP-HOP 2

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Fig. 1: Developing posture, grace and poise



Fig. 2: Bar work: strength and concentration



Fig. 3: Classical ballet: diverse ability and skills



Fig. 4: Nurturing self-discipline



Fig. 5: Experienced Secondary 5 dance students modeling openness in learning each others' genres

The benefits of this collaborative and inclusive way of working perhaps have been best illustrated in one of the most powerful and moving moments in my career. As part of their dance course work, all students were asked to create and perform a solo choreography for our end-of-year dance recital. When one student, a girl with Down syndrome, performed her dance, the audience was brought to tears. The thunderous applause thrilled the girl and her parents, as well as all those who were present. The reward I felt from the student's joy, the ongoing support that her fellow dancers gave her, and the pride they showed in her achievement, are difficult to express.

Conclusion

The concepts of "classroom as studio" and "studio as classroom" imply that each student is an artist with unique abilities, and that these artistic abilities play a pivotal role in learning in our schools. Disciplines that have been traditionally thought of as "classroom subjects" take on more of a studio role as boundaries are blurred through the integration of arts in these classes. Likewise, disciplines that traditionally have been associated with the development of artistic abilities, such as dance, are assumed to have a broader function in educating students, that is, studios become classrooms in a sense as students develop a range of competencies that extend beyond the art of dance itself.

The juxtaposition of these two concepts in the title of this article encourages possibilities for students by allowing them to build on varying interests and abilities in settings that are inclusive and flexible. Done well, it opens up spaces for students to blossom, take risks, and ultimately experience success.

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