

Learning from the Inside Out:
A Professional Development Workshop in Using Art to
Deal with Difficult Issues in the Classroom

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Typically art teachers have focused students' attentions on aesthetically pleasing or intriguing, well-crafted images, objects, and expressions. Art that draws forth deeply felt emotions of unhappy experiences has been understood as the province of art therapists. Yet, however diligently teachers strive to ward them off, sorrows creep into the lives of schoolchildren and spill into classrooms. Disappointment and misfortune are realities of human existence and are experienced—often profoundly—by people of all ages, although children may suffer intense grief from small losses that adults might deem too slight to notice.

When experienced by school children, unhappiness may adversely affect learning. Grief, which will be defined throughout this paper as a “psychological, somatic, and emotional response” to loss (Parker, 2005), may work against a student's ability to focus attention on instruction and impede retention of information (Goleman, 1995, p. 27). Perceiving and making art, on the other hand, has been observed to have calming, therapeutic affects on emotional suffering. Therefore, even though an art teacher may not intend to address children's distress through art, inviting students to perceive and make art may inadvertently serve this purpose.

Recently, while teaching art education in a large Midwestern University, I designed and offered a one-week teachers' workshop, “Using Art to Deal with Difficult Issues in the Classroom.” The purpose of the course was to present strategies for refocusing attentions of anxious or grieving students towards learning. Various strategies, which might assist the grieving in regaining the healthy psychological equilibrium needed for active life engagement, have been described as “grief work” (Freud, 1915). Grief work may assist in the amelioration of sorrows associated with common distresses such as being excluded from play or bullied on the playground, or suffering anxiety resulting from family separations or divorce, as well as with less common but more severe grief over loss of friends or family members through death. Grief work might also address general insecurities, such as those initiated by media exposure to various disasters. Finally, grief work strategies have been resulted in people becoming more compassionate of their own and others' suffering (Hogan & Schmidt, 2002). Thus, the strategies suggested were deemed appropriate for use in classrooms that might include both grieving and non-grieving students.

Supporting the workshop topic as appropriate to art education is the notion that powerful events, whether they be wondrous or tragic in nature, are in affect, “peak” (Maslow, 1988/62) or “aesthetic experiences” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997). Csikszentmihalyi describes aesthetic experiences as unfolding in sequenced order through stages or “dimensions.” First, a sudden sensory stimulus attracts one's attention to something out-of-the ordinary. This triggers a powerful second dimension as an emotional response that compels questions regarding the meaning of the event. In the third dimension, cognitive processes go to work reasoning, ordering, and making sense of the phenomenon. Finally one arrives at a sense of resolution or completion, or of being somehow qualitatively different that one was prior to the experience. In other words, curiosity is stimulated; learning results when imagination and reason work together to structure or restructure meaning, (Manifold, 2005; 2005a).

Traumatic experiences differ from aesthetic experiences to the degree that they profoundly challenge one's understanding of the world and “stimulate questions concerning the meaning of existence” (Parker, 2005). The first three stages of deep grieving are mirrored

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reversals of the dimensions of aesthetic experience. Bowlby (1991) in studies that included young children as subjects, found that the immediate grief response is one of numbness, or lack of sensory awareness. This is often followed by detachment from emotions, then by confusion and disorientation (Nerkin, 1993). According to Janoff-Bulman (1992) social interaction may assist the grief-work of sufferers through these stages toward a state of “growth”—an internalized and restructured sense of the world and one’s place within it. Art may play a role in this grief work, since art draws upon feelings, abstract memories, metaphoric associations, and narratives to weave conscious explanations and new meanings within this internalized ground or “core space of self-identity” (Nerkin, 1993), or “liminal space” (Hall, 1989/1983) where imagination works to reconstruct a new narrative of “personal mythology” (Feinstein & Krippner, 1997).

In the art teacher preparation and general art education courses at our university, pre-service and in-service teachers have been instructed in a variety of strategies for critical engagements with art (Anderson, 1993; Feldman, 1981) that include describing and analyzing the sensory qualities, compositions, content and contexts of artworks in order to arrive at interpretive meaning, and then make judgements about the valuation of the works (Broudy, 1972). Although, these approaches function by gradually bringing the perceiver to internalize the ineffable aesthetic meanings of the artwork; they generally begin with conceptual attention to artworks as detached or *externalized* things. Because the grieving student’s internal sense of ordering meaning has been disrupted, she may have restricted abilities to focus on, organize, or make sense of external information which requires a rational cognitive recognition and processing. In cases where engagements with art are intended as strategies of grief work, a more effective approach might be one that required the immediate experience of *feeling* and knowing ‘of’ and ‘within’ the work of art (Reimer, 1992).

Strategies of Imagination

Notions of educator, Kieran Egan (2005; 1997), have implications for how felt experiences of and within art might apply to grief work. Egan understands imagination as the principle intellectual tool working to construct meaning in that internal core where one’s personal mythologies are formed. For Egan, imaginative thought, as sine qua non of meaning making, awakens in stages from Somatic, Mythic, and Romantic, to Philosophic, and ultimately Ironic modes. Through the early Somatic through Mythic stages, the specialized aspects of imagination at work include: response to rhythm as a means of finding attunement with the natural world and others of one’s intimate community; metaphor as a bridging of abstract and logical thinking; and narrative, whose elements are recognized as yielding to new form. A mother’s instinctual rocking motion and impulse to croon lullabies to her crying infant suggests the soothing effect of Somatic rhythm. Notions of Mythic imagination at work in grief work are implied by findings that even profoundly grieving individuals are able to use metaphors as frameworks for visualizing new life narratives (Swartzborden, 1992),

At the Romantic stage, which Egan gives as the predominant imaginative-intellectual mode of psychologically healthy children between the ages of seven to fourteen, stories grow increasingly complex, with multiple subplots and layered meanings within dualistic parameters. For example, although the world may be simplified and defined by binary opposites—good/bad, heroes/villains, etc.—there is a need to explore the extremes and depths of those opposites, and to list, collect, and catalogue in minute detail the *ground* between the opposing polarities. There is a sense of awe, wonder and curiosity of that which lies at the parameters of the ordinary; these give clues to the workings of things. The romantic imagination wonders how pieces of the world fit together. Puzzles, riddles, and conundrums compel a pitting of wits against the logical universe; to solve a puzzle is to see the universe as infinitely simple and within grasp or control.

Here again, there is a parallel to studies related to working through grief toward growth. Parker (2005) explains that individuals develop understandings or ‘views’ of reality that, if

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untested, prove stable frameworks for making sense of the world. Loss challenges sense of justice and personal control (Marrone, 1999). The personal mythology or story one has woven of the world and one's place in it is conflicted or undone (Feinstein & Krippner, 1997). It is necessary that the grieving individual restructure a new understanding of self within a contextual narrative of the world.

Youth beyond early adolescence are capable of engaging philosophic imagination, whereby, armed with all the intellectual tools of earlier stages, deeper and more complex understandings of the universe are sought. Dualistic distinctions and parameters are challenged and collapsed onto an ambiguous ground. Those relying on philosophic modes of meaning making search beneath the surfaces of ideas and phenomena for subtleties and complexities, entertain multiple interpretations, and, eventually, come to an acceptance of the ultimate irony—that the secrets of the universe may never be known, yet, life has meaning within the mystery. Although these Philosophic and Ironic modes are generally associated with older adolescents and adults, even very young children can and must come to accept the ineluctability of loss and attain some measure of Philosophic recognition and Ironic acceptance.

When applying Egan's notions of imagination to the topic of the workshop, teachers were to recognize the characteristics of various tools of imaginative thinking at work in resources such as children's picture books and artworks. They were to model feeling into and within works of art, and they were to make artworks, artistic sketchbooks, or visual journals in response to those felt experiences. Personal awareness of the powerful emotions and imaginative thought processes that engaging with art might elicit, and recognition of the potential for art as a focus for shared experiences of grief work, were goals of the workshop. The workshop participants were to understand that, if equilibrium is to be regained in order that learning may take place, the impulses to reconcile personal experience with meaning in the world must come from within the suffering individual. The teacher's role is necessarily limited to that of empathetic guide.

The Workshop Activities

The "Using Art" workshop was held during summer of 2006 and met from 9 AM to 4 PM for one week, Monday through Friday. Advertisement of the workshop brought such heavy response from in-service and pre-service teachers that it became necessary to enlist art teacher and artist, Laurie Gatlin, as co-instructor when the anticipated enrollment of twelve¹ more than doubled to twenty-five. The participants were all female. They included upper level undergraduate and graduate level education students, in-service art teachers, and pre-service and in-service generalist classroom teachers. The workshop was offered as an elective course that might fulfill either studio or curriculum and instruction elective requirements of the academic program. In-service teachers could take the course to fulfill a licensure stipulation requiring continued education toward a master's degree.

On the first day of the workshop, following a presentation of the theoretical rationale for the course and the conceptual model to be explored, a warm-up activity introduced participants to the types of philosophic questions a grieving person might intuitively pose². Then workshop participants were invited to explore children's books as resources that might present similar questions and suggest resolutions to these universal concerns. Working in small groups of three or four, the workshop participants were invited to look through a variety of pre-selected books, consider the difficult situation (i. e. grief) each book addressed, and discuss the degree to which the question elicited by the situation was answered or left open for the reader to ponder. The book was studied to determine how the imagery and text worked together to create mood, soothing tenor, and meaning. The most sensitively composed books allowed narratives to unfold slowly in a rhythmic fashion similar to music. They reiterated meter, metaphor and other meaning-making processes associated with the mythic stages of imaginative work. Words and images were woven together in ways that led readers along narrow paths towards the authors' conclusions. Readers

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need not have attended critically to the details and nuances of the visual tale as they were swept along towards its finalé. Thus, the workshop participants saw how carefully selected picture books might model the somatic and mythic impulses that assuage chaotic emotions of children and youth, who are in early ineffable stages of grief-work.

Perceiving Works of Art

Because the elements that contribute to meaning are presented all at once in single works of art, and because interpretations are not always obvious, reading a work of art can be a more difficult undertaking than reading a picture book. Each perceiver of a single work of art must interpret its *story* through the filter of his or her own experience, history, cultural and personal associations. Therefore, the next activity would invite participants to attend to single artworks.

On the morning of the second day, the workshop participants met at the university art museum where they were divided into three smaller groups. One member of each group was given a worksheet of questions to be considered and answered without guidance from the curator, docents, or the instructors. Then members of each group were led to an artwork and asked to explore the work with others of that group for the duration of a 45 minute exercise.

The first group was led to *Swing Landscape* (1938), by Stuart Davis³, and invited to examine the work. They noticed how the shapes, lines, and colors suggested a rhythmic visual flow that made visual analogies to staccatos and halting rests but did not allow the eye to come to an emphatic stop anywhere within the composition. In fact, one might say the visual image was a synesthesia of early American swing jazz music. The effect was pleasantly calming yet invigorating, “as if life swept one along in a bright, rhythmic sway, accented here and there with staccato beats, minor notes, and dark tonal inflections” stated one group participant. Overall they concluded that the work appealed most strongly to somatic and mythic modes of imaginative effort.

Members of a second group were to critically examine *The Finding of Moses* (1629), by Flemish artist Hendrick de Clerck⁴. Painted in the traditional style of sumptuous Renaissance-era narrative tableaus, the painting depicts a well-known Judeo-Christian story⁵. Workshop viewers of the painting noticed the counterbalancing dualism between the princess’s retinue and the humble Hebrew family. They commented upon the correspondence between the shapes of the Pharaoh’s daughter’s breasts and the rounded arches of the distant bridge, from which slain infants are being cast into the milky (fertile) waters of the Nile. Also, the viewers responded to the agitation of the baby, whose apparent anguish should spur a mother’s instinct to comfort him. Yet here the surrogate mother surveys the situation with cool rational dispassion; while, the true mother must constrain her tender concern to a single subtle gesture—the touch of a curl from his brow. The viewers agreed that a careful reading of the story, with all its visually presented texts, subtexts and mini-narratives, could satisfy romantic interests in subjects that portray extreme limits of passionate love and human restraint, tender compassion and utter cruelty, helpless despair and resourcefulness in finding ways to overcome adversity. Storied images, such as this, might be called upon as stimulus for discussions about human motives and choices of action, as well as of the consequences of particular behaviors.

The third group was to study one of Joseph Cornell’s enigmatic boxes⁶ and consider how it might awaken the philosophical imagination. Those who pondered Cornell’s enigmatic little box expressed surprise that an art object, that had seemed so inscrutable upon first viewing, quickly yielding to their investigative prodding by revealing a trove of possible interpretations, personal associations, and spontaneous analogies to the unexpected. Their explorations yielded a torrent of historic, geographic, psychological, and personal associations. Older students noticed that it was created during a time when people were still awed by having watched Neil Armstrong’s first steps on the moon, and mesmerized by photographs of the earth from outer space. The perspective compelled awareness of the fragility and temporality of our existence in

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the universe. The presence of a little seashell in Cornell's box recalled the ocean, the tides kept in balance by the moon, human's evolution from the sea, and personal experiences of playing along the ocean. Students wondered, posed questions, and suggested interpretations of juxtaposing references to the expanse of the universe and a tiny bit of life in the shape of the stars upon which all our lives depends, between infinite and intimate time, between open and enclosed or outer and inner spaces, between the philosopher's pondering of life's existence and the play of children.

Bolstered by having shared impressions with others who supported and built upon their initially tentative offerings, members of each group seemed to gain confidence and a sense of empowerment regarding their abilities to find meaning in otherwise mysterious works of art. They were encouraged to find a place within themselves that corresponded with the meanings of the image.

Perceiving and Making Art as Metaphor of Self

The next activity required each participant to draw again upon the imagination in finding a work of art with which she felt some intuited affinity⁷. After selecting the work, she was to research the artist and artwork, keeping a record of the information found in a journal-sketchbook, along with notations of how she felt about or responded to that information, how it contributed to her understanding or insight of the work, and—most importantly—how the work might be a metaphor for some aspect of her life. Afterwards, she was to create an artistic expression, in the form of a journal-sketchbook as a record and visual narrative of her journey of self-discovery and revelatory findings. The goal of using art to deal with difficult issues in the classroom was not simply that students draw understandings about sorrow from works of art done by others, but that students might create new meanings from their own difficult experiences. Art-making, by requiring that the maker respond to tacit clues and felt awareness through gesture, may be especially effective in calling forth and putting to work deeply embedded comprehension of internal states of being. Neurologist and learning theorist, Frank R. Wilson, (1998), reiterates the notion of mind and hand working together in a feedback loop to bring about therapeutic effects. He affirms, “when we form something through artistic ability, we are formed and changed in the process, and that spurs the developmental process” (p. 68-69).

To provide models for the type of media that would yield easily to this work, assistant instructor Laurie Gatlin brought several exemplars of her own handmade books⁸. She demonstrated methods of constructing books and demonstrated collage techniques that could be used to compose the pages of the book. Although considerable latitude was given as to the form the journal-sketchbook might take, collage was suggested because the media is seen as lending itself to the flow-of-consciousness processes that the search for a metaphor of self requires.

The process of collage imposes interplay of fragments from multiple sources that challenge artists and perceivers to draw upon memories of lived experiences and recall knowledge of cultures and traditions to make sense of disparate artifacts. Because “the creating of each fragment, each articulation—be it text, artwork, or some combination of forms—influences and is influenced by others” (Vaughan, 2005), the metaphoric associations that may be drawn from a single work might depend upon an endless variety of subtle, ephemeral, synchronistic connections between the artist and her work. In fact, the artist's choice of materials may not depend so much upon a conscious act as upon an intimate dialogue with the forms within and without, that is, “an active interplay or coupling, between the perceiving body and that which it perceives . . . at the level of . . . spontaneous sensorial engagement (Abram, 1996, p. 57).

Sharing Self Discoveries

On the third day of the workshop, each participant came prepared to share images of the artworks she had selected and the artistic work she had created as a metaphor of self. In groups of 5, without the intervention of the instructors, the students presented their images, art, and

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emotional accounts of the metaphoric association and the journeys they had taken in recalling and reconstructing these personal accounts. The images and objects they produced as results of their self-exploratory journeys were crafted with extraordinary care—especially given that over a fourth of the workshop participants had had little or no formal art background beyond middle school. A social studies teacher, for example, chose Venus of Willendorf as a metaphor of her self and life experiences. As a three-dimensional sketchbook-journal, she decorated a small box to represent her inner life and filled the box with hand-printed and collaged prayer cards. Each card spoke of a painful or joyous benchmark in her life and invoked the ‘goddess’ of history to put these events into proper perspective so that equilibrium and continuity be reassured. Other students created picture books, paintings, posters, or sculptural pieces. The narratives these inspired were shared and received with reverent respect that implied each student’s recognition that what was being revealed was a sacred aspect of the presenter’s inner being. Although several of the workshop participants had previously known one another in other classroom contexts, all the students described this activity as awakening new depths of knowing and caring for one another. Empathy was engaged. “We knew things about one another before and we were friends,” Sadie said of her fellow students, “but this took us to another level of knowing. Now we care about each other. That’s different than just knowing about and liking one another.” This reiterated Hogan and Schmidt’s (2002) conclusions that successful grief work brings one to a greater sense of caring and compassion for oneself and others. Likewise, social engagement was a critical component of the grief work process as described by Janoff-Bulman (1992). Knowing that others cared deeply for one’s emotional well-being seemed to enhance the transcendent effect of the activity on the presenters to such powerful level that several students wept as they related a metaphoric correspondence of self and art.

The Final Project

As a final assignment the participants of the workshop were given the option to identify an issue that might be of concern to K-12 students and create a teaching unit on that topic, or the participant might research a personally problematic issue through art making, and consider how this journey of self-discovery might inform her understanding of children’s struggles with similar issues, and how the personal experience might transfer to teaching in the classroom. All but five of the workshop participants selected the latter option.

In their completed works, the participant of the “Using Art” workshop demonstrated a grasp of what it means to trigger learning from within the heart of aesthetic experiences. For several, this meant a journey within oneself in order to comprehend what the child might be experiencing. Guiding the child to learning would depend upon the degree to which one’s personal sensibilities could be brought into correspondence with the inner lives of the students. Peggy, who works as a school counselor of a large urban elementary school, wanted to create a unit to address the problem of playground bullying. As she gathered materials for the unit, however, she came to recognize that she harbored unresolved grief of having allowed herself to be emotionally bullied by a former husband. Although several years earlier she had ended the marriage, she realized she was still hiding the pain of that abuse from her family, her friends, and herself. As cathartic expression, she created a collaged pastiche of images describing her descent, despair, revelation and triumphant re-emergence from sorrow and secrecy of that experience. The journey of self-discovery was crucial to Peggy’s ability to intimately comprehend and address the complexities of feelings being experienced by her students in order to guide them out of the cycle of bullying relationships.

Lula’s self-examination serves as an object lesson of how carefully teachers must look within themselves and feel within the student to guide rather than direct student learning. Her openly visualized anguish seems to have been too obvious for her own teacher to see. In her poignant reflection, she wrote,

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After my mom passed away, . . . I tried to express my emotions through my artwork. I once painted a tomb in my watercolor class. My professor asked me why I had drawn a tomb. I answered that this symbolized death. She said ‘you do not simply draw a tomb to represent death. It is too obvious.’ Maybe she was right. But . . . I was not trying to be an artist. I just wanted to relieve my pain.

This reinforced to Lula that she, too, should be sensitive to student’s whose work might not always be good “art” but might be deeply meaningful nonetheless.

Implications for Art Education

In the weeks that followed the workshop, several in-service teachers designed curriculum units that incorporated entry points for inserting student grief. Tina, who instructed a group of adolescent girls in a community center, developed a unit that invited the girls to consider issues of feminine beauty and the desire of girls to be beautiful, popular, and accepted by their peers. In order to attain the goal of peer acceptance, a few of the girls had felt compelled to follow punishing diets, restrain their behavior, and be ever vigilant of personal appearance and socially accepted interactions. The girls feared—and some had experienced—that expressing their real personalities, interests and, and sense-of-style might mark them ‘unpopular’ or as social pariahs within their school communities. The girls were invited to explore their conflicted anxieties through viewing advertisement art and paintings, and through a collage mask-making project. As a result, the girls seemed to recognize that their peers shared similar fears and came to a greater appreciation of each others’ unique attributes.

Finally, the workshop participants were able to model, design and implement lessons that acknowledged art as a bridge to inner and outer spaces of knowing. They came to an understanding that viewing sorrow from the outside may not immediately reveal the truth of the thing. Yet art might reveal visual roadmaps through diverse sorrows of the world and if the grieving student is invited to seek meaning, grief work as a healing sort of learning, may take place. However, to affect this *inside out* learning, teachers must be willing to explore the fearful aesthetic terrain of their own lives and seek connective links to the imaginative realms of their students’ minds. Only then can the mutual sorrows of human experience be transformed into deeply meaningful learning.

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¹ Professional development workshops, offered during the summer art education program at our university, are generally limited to 12-15 students

² An open-ended question, such as "What is joy?" was presented. Each student, in turn, was to build upon, adapt, or bend the original question toward a new direction. For example, the first student might respond, "What is the source of joy?" The second might ask, "Why is there sorrow in the world?" The third add, "Can anything sorrowful be beautiful?" and so on.

³ Oil on canvas, 86 3/4 x 172 7/8 in. Bloomington, Indiana University of Art. May be viewed online at <http://xroads.virginia.edu/~ASI/musi212/emily/davis3.html>.

⁴ Oil on panel 55 _ x 66 in. (140.3 x 167.6 cm); frame: 61 _ x 72 in. (156.2 x 182.9 cm) Gift of Stanley W. Wulc, 66.24. May be viewed online at <http://www.iub.edu/~iuam/provenance/view.php?id=277>.

⁵ The Hebrew slaves of Egyptian had grown so populous as to threaten to the balance of power within the nation. Therefore, the pharaoh had ordered a slaughter of all male Hebrew infants. Moses' mother and sister, Miriam, hid him in a basket at the river's edge where the Pharaoh's daughter bathed regularly. When the princess found the child, she was moved to rescue him and raise him as her own. In this scene, she is being persuaded by Miriam to procure a wet nurse—the child's mother in disguise—to tend the babe.

⁶ Although the specific work examined by these students is not available online, information about Cornell and a selection of his works may be viewed online at <http://www.artchive.com/artchive/C/cornell.html>, and <http://www.ibiblio.org/wm/paint/auth/cornell/>.

⁷ In many respects, the assignment resembles a similar activity asked of students and recorded by the author in a previous publication (Manifold, 2005a), with one significant difference. The participants of the “Using Art” workshop were not required to write a paper about their work.

⁸ A selection of pages from Laurie Gatlin’s artists books are available for viewing at: http://firstclass.plainfield.k12.in.us/~Laurie_Gatlin/sketch/compobook.htm, and http://firstclass.plainfield.k12.in.us/~Laurie_Gatlin/sketch/artjournal_2.htm