

# *Making Art, Making Connections*

RENA UPITIS

*Queen's University*

When adults are asked to think of something they love to do, something they have learned about over an extended period of time, something that gives them pleasure (though not without struggle), nearly everyone will identify a pursuit that is connected with the arts, the body, or the natural world. For many years, I have pondered what it is about these three areas that are linked, and why it is that pursuits in the arts, pursuits involving learning through one's body, and pursuits that involve intimate interactions with the natural world, are so important to our out-of-school learning. I have come to believe that what composing music, playing soccer, and hiking in the Rocky Mountains have in common is that they have the potential to fully engage the intellect, the emotions, the spirit, and the physical being. Further, it is these kinds of activities that connect us, in some fundamental way, with the earth and with what it means to be human on this spinning blue ball. I would make the claim that the passion and seriousness with which people engage in such pursuits is precisely the passion that is required to nurture and sustain meaningful learning in schools.

This kind of learning is possible in all subjects. Mathematicians and scientists who are at the top of their form—whether they are six or sixty years old—experience the same exhilaration from their creations and discoveries as do artists and dancers. Mathematicians talk about the beauty of proofs, the elegance of solutions—judgments that involve an

aesthetic dimension. One of the great lessons the arts have to teach is that real learning ought to be measured by standards of beauty.

Indeed, one of the guiding principles in assembling this issue of JCACS was that of beauty. As Brent Davis (in press) has so eloquently stated, “Science has not provided meaningful answers to such questions as ‘Why am I here?’ and ‘What are beauty, love, and honour?’” The papers assembled in this collection are, in a humble way, an attempt to address precisely those questions.

Davis further argues that “those traditions that are aligned with ... questions of deep meaning are the ones that seem best fitted to the broad senses that were originally suggested by the word teaching.” He claims that “educating was originally and fully focused on matters of *gnosis*,” that is, matters that addressed spiritual knowing and beauty. Davis claims that, with the dawning of the modern era, the emphasis on teaching shifted to practical know-how, to *episteme*, and with the triumph of episteme over gnosis, the comfortable co-existence of these two states of knowing—and being—collapsed. Perhaps it is in this century that the two states of knowing will, once again, find a harmonic co-existence. Certainly, such a harmonic co-existence seems not only desirable but possible to me, after reading, many times, the essays and other contributions contained in the pages herein.

This seems an appropriate place to comment on the ‘new look’ for JCACS. If you are already familiar with the journal, you will realize that with this issue, we have re-designed the website. The images that you see throughout the website were created by members of the Queen’s University arts education research group—undergraduate, graduate, and post-doctoral students, administrative staff, and faculty. Every Wednesday morning, we meet in the kitchen of the old Stone House to engage in a couple of hours of art-making. The Stone House sits in the middle of a open field just north of the Education building (we moved here a few years ago when our pile of data for a national research project on arts education grew too high to accommodate in our university offices). It is in this house that activities of both work and play thrive in ‘comfortable co-existence’, as we deal with the practical matters of teaching and research, but also with matters of *gnosis*. Our art-making has become both a welcome and necessary ritual. It grounds us and our work. It reminds us why we became involved in education and the arts in the first place. And it leaves us with a sense of mid-week renewal, giving us energy and direction for our other work. As it happened, we were creating collages when the JCACS re-design was being envisaged, and this medium lends itself well both to paper and the electronic format.

Because many of us were also involved in various aspects of getting this edition of *JCACS* ready, it made sense to us to integrate these images into the journal, just as the production of these images is integrated with other aspects of our intellectual and spiritual landscapes.

This issue opens with a feature that was introduced in the inaugural issue of *JCACS*. "Curriculum Genealogies" reproduces previously published work, coupled with a retrospective by the original author. An excerpt from the work of Ellen Dissanayake is reproduced in the present issue, along with her response to that excerpt. I first encountered Dissanayake's work when I read her book *Homo Aestheticus: Where Art Comes from and Why*. It is from this book that a chapter is excerpted for the Curriculum Genealogy. In it, Dissanayake takes a bio-evolutionary perspective in explaining why the arts are fundamental to human experience, and indeed, to human survival. It is through a re-reading of her work that I have come closer to answering the question I posed at the beginning of my remarks, that is, why the arts, the body, and the natural world seem so fundamental to adult learning. Dissanayake makes a compelling case for how these three areas have been important to the human condition since pre-modern times, and how they continue to thrive in many contemporary human societies. She shows, for example, how ritual and repetition associated with ceremonies that involve the arts at their heart have assisted in shaping and ordering our physical and social worlds. She also shows how the arts make enjoyable experiences memorable and, conversely, how the arts make otherwise unbearable experiences bearable. In her charming revisiting of the chapter titled "The Core of Art: Making Special," Dissanayake speaks of the particular circumstances by which her two first books were created, and how her term "making special" has fared over the past decade.

Following the "Curriculum Genealogy" are four essays that explore the connections between art-making and curriculum. In recognizing that the arts provide ways of looking at the kinds of questions raised by Davis, and that these ways of thinking about curriculum could be widely applied to other disciplines, the idea for a symposium titled "Learning to Create Insight: The Work of the Arts in Curriculum Studies" was conceived. "Learning to Create Insight" was presented at the 2003 annual meeting of the Canadian Society for the Study of Education (CSSE) in Halifax, Nova Scotia. The symposium was co-hosted by the Canadian Association for Curriculum Studies (CACS) and the Artists, Researchers, and Teachers Special Interest Group (ARTS-SIG). Organized by myself (as President of the ARTS-SIG) and Dennis Sumara (then Vice-President and now President of CACS), we invited scholars who were active both

as artists and as curriculum theorists to participate in the symposium. We asked them to portray some aspect of their art-making and to link that art-making to curriculum theory and classroom practices. This they did. Following the conference, the presenters were invited to submit papers for publication in this issue of JCACS. All four of the presenters agreed, and their essays are contained in the pages that follow. In preparing their papers, presenters were challenged to bring the art-making alive in the electronic format. Consequently, you will find a mixture of words, images, and sounds in these presentations along with the theoretical implications of their art and ideas.

The first of these essays, by Heesoon Bai, is titled “Learning from Zen Arts: A Lesson in Intrinsic Valuation.” With flawless logic and a heartfelt rendering, Bai takes the reader on a dazzling philosophical journey through Western and Zen traditions of art and philosophy. When we reach the destination, we find ourselves concluding that the arts—particularly where ethics and aesthetics are merged—can, and must be, a healing force for the prevailing instrumentalism that many of our popular cultural habits and practices now entail. Bai claims that instrumentalism is a “hegemonic ethics” that is “objectivized and depersonalized,” an ethics that threatens our very existence. In her illustrated essay, Bai comes to the same conclusion that Dissanayake came to in *Homo Aesthetics*—albeit by a very different route—and that is that “the arts are essential and critical to planetary survival.”

Bai’s essay is followed by Katharine Smithrim’s musical offering titled “Singing Lessons: A Hidden Pedagogy.” The essay begins with a 10-minute excerpt of an hour long recital in which Smithrim details the lessons that her various singing teachers have instilled over many decades. Both the script itself and video segments featuring Smithrim and her accompanist are used to present this portion of the recital. Following the performance, Smithrim describes how her teaching is enhanced when she remembers to bring the singer to class. Smithrim tells us, for example, that “all parts [of the singer] are required to sing well: the physical, the intellectual, the spiritual and the emotional. The singer knows how to engage her whole being and the whole beings of her students in the process of teaching.” Now, to a singer—and to others involved in other forms of art-making—it is impossible *not* to engage the physical body in the production of the art and in the learning. Indeed, it is hard to imagine any learning that does not involve the body in some way—yet, much curriculum is presented as if to a being without a physical existence.

In the essay “Toward an Aesthetic of Unfolding In/Sights through Curriculum,” Rita Irwin also makes the claim that cognitive ways of

knowing are limiting, while, at the same time acknowledging that these are the most prevalent ways of thinking embraced by “government created policies, laws, and curricula.” She argues that aesthetic approaches “appreciate the awkward spaces existing between chaos *and* order, complexity *and* simplicity, certainty *and* uncertainty,” noting the importance of novelty, surprise, and humour in invigorating such ‘spaces’ to be active for creation of many forms. Irwin weaves images of jazz improvisation and the practice of ‘underpainting’ to make the claim that teaching practices, and, moreover, educational institutions, could be transformed through the sensibilities that these two forms of art-making offer. She states that “just as [artists create underpaintings] destined to be re-painted, teachers re-create plans for instruction, researchers re-imagine the design of their research programs, and curriculum leaders re-envision projects, events and policies. When this happens, teachers, researchers, and curriculum leaders are moving beyond comfortable practices and imagining new futures.” Two of Irwin’s own forest paintings are incorporated into the heart of this essay.

Rebecca Luce-Kapler’s opening poem in the final essay “Orality and the Poetics of Curriculum” is titled “The Milky Way.” In it, images are painted with words: images of the early autumn, a mother’s body, the light of stars, a reading lamp, the light “where dying goes ... a pathway to brilliance.” Images of the body and the natural world, once again—and images that are delivered with a rhythmic grace. However, Luce-Kapler tells us that her aim, in this essay, is not to explore the “interrelationship of rhythm with image and word” or even the place of poetry in schools. Instead, she has chosen to focus beyond the writing of the poem, beyond the text on the page, to a consideration of “the oral origins of poetry.” Like Dissanayake, she invites us to think back to earlier times, coaxing us with the claim that “poetry reaches back to the structures of memory before words were written down”. In so doing, we hear Luce-Kapler’s own voice on audio segments throughout the essay as she tells us that “we remember with bones—the bones of our bodies, the bones of our language.”

Although this issue of JCACS does not include the “Curriculum Lives” feature that appeared in the inaugural issue, two other features that were first envisaged by the founding editors, Dennis Sumara and Rebecca Luce-Kapler, appear in this issue. “Curriculum Pedagogies” presents a paper by Betty Hanley that describes the changing demands for the preparation of music teachers for contemporary schools. Hanley’s comprehensive account describes the trials and tribulations of challenging the traditional Western music curriculum and the ways in

which it has been taught. She also provides detailed accounts of the kinds of questions she and her students have asked of one another, the musical repertoire she has chosen to include in the course that has recently emerged, and teaching vignettes—moments of frustration, moments of triumph. It is my hope that the fundamental shifts that Hanley has made in her teaching of the music education curriculum are ones that other professors, teaching in other disciplines, will find both instructive and inspirational.

This issue of JCACS closes with two short Reviews. Eileen Harris offers her views of Elliott Eisner's new book titled *The Arts and the Creation of Mind*, from her perspective as a former elementary classroom teacher, and from the perspective of a curriculum scholar in arts education who is familiar with Eisner's earlier work and that of other theorists in arts education. In Ann Patteson's review of the film *The Hours*, she closes with these words:

[L]ives and living are rarely straightforward, but are, rather, ambiguous. *The Hours* prompts us to consider the creative impulse that may be fed and sustained through the exploration of that ambiguity and to wonder what moments of beauty we may have missed in the drive to achieve mandated curricular outcomes. And, the fact that we can still hear the voice of Virginia Woolf through the layers of decades, Cunningham's book, and the film, reminds us that art transcends time to add radiance to the moments of our lives inside and outside the classroom.

Moments of radiance. Beauty. The exploration of ambiguity. Indeed, these are themes that are illuminated throughout the offerings in this collection. May you be enraptured, perturbed, and, ultimately, find resonance and energy from the ideas contained in the pages that follow.

## References

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