

## Narrative Writing Assignment: Conducting the Juicy Air

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It was a hot Saturday morning in the middle of July and I had just finished trudging three large containers of art materials and resources into the art studio. This art studio was in a small art supply store, in a small Southern Ontario town, and here I would teach an art class to a small group of children.

As I pushed open the front door of the store, using the weight of the box in my arms to force the old and stubborn door open – I saw a lady rush up the street towards me.

“Oh, Miss! Miss! I realize that your store doesn’t open for another half hour, but would you mind if I came in a *little* bit early to look around? I am in *desperate* need of a thin paint brush, but don’t have time to wait for your store to open.”

“Actually,” I responded hesitantly, “This isn’t *my* store. I just work as an art instructor here.” Watching the lady’s face droop in response to my statement, I decided to add, “But I’m sure if you’d like to look around while I get prepared for this morning’s class, the owner wouldn’t mind.” Recognizing that the last few months had been hard on local business owners because of the economic downturn, I assumed the owner would be pleased to sell something before the store officially opened.

After letting the lady in the store, I was bombarded by a series of questions about different types of paint, brushes, canvas supports, and much more. Assisting this woman and fielding her questions took over twenty minutes. At the end of this period the woman decided not to buy anything.

Frustrated by the fact that this woman had absorbed all the time and energy I had planned to put into setting up the studio, I began to make use of the few minutes I had left to prepare the space. I expected six children between the ages of eight and twelve to attend the workshop. When I had originally marketed the class, I envisioned youth ages eight to thirteen to attend. Days after the advertisement for classes was distributed, a mother called the store to ask if her seven year old daughter could attend. Being that she was the first child to show interest in the class, the owner gladly registered her for the course – regardless of her age. Four weeks later, this mother and her daughter were standing at the front door of the art store, peering in through the window at me as I scrambled to get the studio organized.

Noticing their faces in the window, I walked to the stubborn old door and pulled it open – welcoming them as warmly as I could. The girl’s name was Zoe. She was a mature seven year old who confidently marched into the store announcing that she was there to take an art class. Her mother trotted behind her with the girl’s backpack and kindly introduced herself. I pointed to the area in the store where the art class was to take place and they diligently headed there. Then, other children began arriving with their parents. The parents of these children introduced themselves, introduced their child, and then asked when they should return. I explained when the class would be ending and all, but Zoe’s mother, left the store. Zoe’s mother sat down on a bench positioned parallel to the work table and folded her hands in her lap.

Students sat down at their seats and I began to teach. The focus of the day’s lesson was colour. Students would learn about colour through batik dyeing, making edible colour-wheel-cupcakes, and creating rainbow candles from the left-over batik wax. It was a four hour class – full of creative activities.

We began the class by tacking white cotton t-shirts to wooden frames. On these frames students applied melted wax in imaginative patterns. These patterns would resist the blue, red,

and yellow dyes that we would be using later in the day. After I demonstrated how to paint with wax safely, most of the children engaged in the activity passionately.

Zoe, being younger than the rest, required more help than the others. While explaining the process again to her, I noticed her confidence had become deflated. Every instruction I gave was met with the same response: "I can't do it Britt". Zoe's mother would then say, "Yes, you can do it Zoe", or "You are here to take the class Zoe, so you will do it." Her mother's forceful responses made me begin to question whether it was a good idea to allow Zoe to participate in the class. *Her frustration was fuelling her mother's frustration, which was negatively affecting the entire class.* When finally, I had begun to feel and emit the frustration that was tainting the room, Zoe caught on.

Unfortunately, her mother continued to coax her. This coaxing caused Zoe to disengage from the process and lose focus. Recognizing that this coaxing was negatively affecting Zoe's positive growth, I invited Zoe's mother to engage in the process by making her own batik t-shirt. Made noticeably uncomfortable by my invitation, Zoe's mother set aside her purse, pulled back her hair, and sat down at the work table.

Zoe's mother quickly began to find out how challenging the process was. Coincidentally, once she embraced the artistic challenge in front of her, she stopped nagging her daughter. Working side by side, this mother and daughter created unique wax designs that resisted the dye beautifully. Once all of the students were working together, I could feel the air in the room shift from that of an oppressive, heavy stillness to a juicy, flowing openness. Although everyone was working on their own individual projects, it felt as though a spirited community of artists had developed. As each person grew more comfortable, this newly formed artistic community charged the air with an electric vibrancy.

By the end of this class, the frustration felt at the beginning of the workshop had melted away. Each of us had tuned into one-another. We left feeling as though our souls had spent the last few hours celebrating our togetherness through song and dance.

Weeks later in the art store, I was given a card and present from Zoe's mother. In the card she expressed to me how thankful she was that I had asked her to take part in the children's art class in July. She wrote that she had been diagnosed with a rare eye disease that would result in blindness within the next few years. For this reason, she had been trying to spend as much time with her daughter as she could - fearing the day when she would no longer see her daughter's face. She realized during the colour workshop that because of her fears, she had become a crutch to her daughter. It was not until the art class that Zoe's unhealthy dependency on her mother became clear. By reconnecting with Zoe in the form of an artist, this mother had begun to model the type of human she wanted her daughter to become: one whose appreciation of the arts continues to give birth to the creative process.

### **Analysis: Conducting the Juicy Air**

I tell this story because it represents the first time I realized my role as an art instructor could be likened to that of a conduit. Like a conductor of electricity, I represented the means through which participants in my workshop could channel their artistic voice.

The old and stubborn door to the art studio which required force to open was what separated the busy, down-town street from the quiet, art studio. Conceptually, this door represents a shifting of perspective, from a materialistic, everyday selfishness to a spiritual, selflessness. In my experience, engaging in art-making is one of the most difficult steps in the

artistic process. Before anything is drawn, painted, or sculpted, the artist's vision for creation is limitless. Once a line has been drawn, a colour painted, or a form sculpted, the artist's vision is given boundaries. Boundaries can cause one to become anxious at the loss of the vision of limitlessness that once was. Although participants had made it through the door to the studio, they still had thresholds to cross - built in the depths of their minds.

Frustration permeated the first part of the workshop, and I feel I contributed to this. I began the class frustrated because students were walking into an unprepared space. Like a conductor, I channelled these energies into the class in ways so subtle that participants blamed themselves for feelings of insecurity and vulnerability. As I analyze this experience, I recognize that in order to be a strong conductor for others, energy flowing from my past experiences, my present concerns, or my future aspirations needs to be diverted so that their experiences, concerns, and aspirations can have space to flow.

### **Implications for Teaching**

There will always be distractions in life that pull us away from what we think we need to be focusing on. After reflecting upon this story, I now see that the lady I assisted at the beginning of the story was an unnecessary distraction. As an artist and art teacher an understanding of with whom and what I spend my time and energy is very important. Because I feel that my role as an artist and art teacher is crucial in the world, my energy should have been invested into this role.

After this workshop, I came to the conclusion that a parent who is passionate about the education of their child is a model parent. Although I had originally envisioned the workshop to be for children and youth only, I realized how beneficial it was to have Zoe's mother taking part. In reflection, it is ironic to me that I thought Zoe's mother was abnormal for participating in the workshop - unlike other children's parents. After I received the letter from Zoe's mother explaining her eye condition, I realized that Zoe's mother was demonstrating the most normal behaviour of any of the parents whose children participated. Being that we only have a short time to spend with the people we love, why not spend more time with them? As a teacher I will work to encourage the active participation of parents in their children's education as I feel this is to everyone's benefit.

Through the analysis of this story I have come to relate the functioning of a community to the functioning of an art workshop. Communities function most effectively when everyone is engaged wholeheartedly in a task that contributes to the greater good. If people are trying to actively participate in community life, but are only willing to do so from the periphery, frustrations will arise.

As I taught this workshop I found student-directed work-periods to be as beneficial to students' education as teacher-directed periods of instruction. For this reason, in future workshops I will limit the amount of incessant chatter I fill the airspace with. As an artist I recognize that when people give me too much feedback about my work I get defensive and less open to suggestion. As an art teacher I want students to remain receptive to external input. By choosing specific times during which input is contributed, students remain receptive to the current of the class.