

Strong Poets: Teacher Education and the Arts

by

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Abstract. The arts have a significant role in creating and recreating healthy lives, for individuals and the community. One of the most effective ways to enrich the arts in schools is through teacher education at the preservice level and through professional development for practicing teachers. Suggested strategies for teacher education include

- supporting teachers to become beginning artists themselves,
- encouraging depth in self-knowledge,
- exploring the notion of an aesthetic playground,
- recognising the spiritual dimension in the arts and teaching,
- accepting the primacy of the imagination in learning and living, and
- encouraging teachers to continue to learn.

The final section of the paper describes necessary conditions for supporting teacher education in the arts at the levels of boards of education, ministries of education, and faculties of education.

When we joined the Faculty of Education at Queen's University 11 and 15 years ago, respectively, there was coffee in the faculty lounge every morning at 10:00. The "regulars" were always there for at least half an hour; there was laughter and conversation, and probably some of the best ideas of the day were generated in that informal morning break. Now, it would be looked at askance if any of us took the time

to sit around and drink a cup of coffee with colleagues in the morning. We don't even stop for lunch. Up and down the halls people are eating their lunches sitting at their computers. New faculty members do not even know about the abandoned faculty dining room. We eat lunch alone, drink coffee alone, worry alone, feel inadequate alone, struggle alone, think alone, and even celebrate major accomplishments alone.

In his book about the erosion of community in America, Putnam (2000) traces the decline of civic engagement. He demonstrates the steady, significant and rapid change since the 1950s from living in community to living in isolation. He traces how we have become increasingly disconnected from one another. We are less involved politically and less involved in community affairs. Religious participation has plummeted, connections in the workplace have disintegrated, we have far fewer informal social connections, and there is less altruism, volunteerism, and philanthropy. *Bowling Alone* is the provocative title and image of Putnam's book; we used to bowl in leagues, now we bowl alone.

Putnam offers what he calls six spheres of possibility for creating, indeed recreating, a healthy social fabric. He suggests these six areas deserve special attention because of their potential for transforming society: youth and schools, the workplace, urban and metropolitan design, religion, arts and culture, and politics and government.

Teacher preparation in arts education is thickly associated with three of those spheres of possibility, namely, youth and schools, the workplace, and arts and culture. If we include the spiritual dimension of life in Putnam's "religion" sphere, then our work as arts educators is embedded in four out of six of those transforming possibilities.

While many of us understand the power of the arts in our lives as individuals and in community, there is still the attitude expressed

by Hausman (1970) over 30 years ago that the arts are "unwelcome boarders in a burgeoning household" (p. 14). So, knowing the potential of the arts and, at the same time, realizing that there is not widespread acceptance of that potential, what kinds of teacher preparation in the arts would open hearts, open minds, and open paths of possibility? In this paper, we suggest a series of "spheres of possibility" for teacher preparation in arts education, spheres of possibility for creating and/or recreating healthy personal lives and healthy social fabric. While opportunities for change exist at every level, the possibilities we suggest are at the individual level for teacher educators, preservice teachers and practicing teachers, and, in the concluding section, at the systems level for faculties of education, school boards, and ministries of education.

Teachers as Artists

Our first "sphere of possibility" is to provide preservice teachers, and indeed all teachers with opportunities to experience the arts for themselves before (or even instead of) addressing the issues of how to teach the arts. Telling people about the importance of the arts is generally ineffective. Teachers need to experience the transforming power of the arts in their own lives in order to believe and understand the power of arts experiences and to make subsequent changes in their personal and professional practices. Teachers as Artists (see <www.educ.queensu.ca/~arts>) is a professional development program that focuses on supporting teachers in becoming beginning artists themselves rather than on learning how to teach the arts. In the Teachers as Artists model, the entire staff (including the principal and educational assistants) in single-school communities

take part in five or six workshops, interact with artists-in-residence, and pursue individual learning projects over the course of each school year. Schools choose from a wide variety of workshops presented by local artists, including, for example, printmaking, photography, carving, and the production of a 10-minute opera (Upitis, Smithrim, & Le Clair, in press).

In a study of the effects of the Teachers as Artists program, we concluded that profound changes to teachers' practices and beliefs arose when teachers worked directly with artists and experienced the artistic process while making their own art. We found that lasting and profound changes occurred for a proportion of participants (20%) after two years of professional development. Among the far-reaching benefits teachers ascribed to the program were confidence to try new things, a new appreciation of the planning and work involved in art making, a revitalisation of teaching in other subject areas, and a commitment to provide more time, materials, instruction and support for students' art making (Upitis & Smithrim, 1998). One teacher reflected that experiences with the arts had given her *a different perspective on how to teach for understanding and learning*. Another teacher described her experience in this way:

I was very structured and goal oriented [before the Teachers as Artists program]. Now I enjoy teaching more. I see there are different ways to get there. It's more challenging. I attribute this entirely to the Program. The artists were obviously very goal oriented, but they took such joy in the process. They nurtured us. When you made a mistake, they almost celebrated it . . . It's about the only nurturing I've ever had as a teacher. You have no idea what it's like to have someone say, "Hey, [Heather], that's really good." And when I do this with the kids now, they glow. They get warm and move a little closer. (Patteson, Meban, Upitis, & Smithrim, 2000)

For us, the most important goal of teacher preparation in arts education, and in professional development programs as well, is that teachers become intrinsically motivated to provide arts experiences for their students. Therein lies our first "sphere of possibility."

Strong Poets

In his book *Touching Eternity: The Enduring Outcomes of Teaching*, Tom Barone (2001) tells a story about Don Forrister, a visual arts teacher in Appalachia, and about how Forrister influenced the lives of his students long beyond their time together in the classroom. Barone interviewed several former students 10 or more years after they had studied art with Forrister in high school. "To his students [Forrister] was that rare person who avoided enacting a prefabricated life story, whatever its origins, but who was crafting an original script with an elegance and coherence all its own" (p. 131). Barone refers to the philosopher Harold Bloom's (1973) use of the term *strong poet* for someone who is able to write his or her life like a poem, who marches to his or her own drum, and whose identity is strong enough to withstand many of the influences of the dominant culture. We hold the view that teachers who are strong poets themselves are likely to affirm creativity and imagination in their students and to encourage them to go within for their ideas.

Teachers of the arts, in particular, are able to encourage the strong poet in their students because the arts develop strong-poet attributes. The arts encourage people to go within for ideas. They give people experience with situations in which there is no known answer, where there are multiple solutions, where nuance can be all important, where the tension of ambiguity is not only tolerated but appreciated as fertile

ground, and where imagination is honoured over rote knowledge (Smithrim, 2000).

Doing art work - whether it be sculpting, playing the guitar, or creating a dramatic presentation on bullying - asks, and even demands, that we bring our own ideas to the work. Art work teaches us that our own ideas have more juice than the ideas received from pop or dominant cultures. Art work teaches us that hard work and perseverance bring results over time; it teaches us to accept delayed gratification. Art work opens our eyes to the details in simple things. Art work provides a rich overlay on everyday experience. Without that experience of finding satisfaction in simple, everyday life, one needs to seek inspiration and excitement from outside, from ever more graphic violence and sexual content in film, TV, video games and books, or from the rush of faster cars, trendy running shoes, and six-figure salaries.

As arts curriculum teachers of young adults at our Faculty of Education, we hear over and over stories of young people who wanted to be artists, musicians, or actors, but who were not strong enough poets to resist parents who insisted they pursue a more lucrative professional education and career. Their teacher education coursework in the arts reminds them, often painfully, of their inner longings and proclivities. In his (2001) analysis of the enduring outcomes of Forrister's teaching, Barone says,

A rich imagination, for Forrister, was generally incompatible with predictability and gentility. Indeed, he admitted his attraction to a healthy rebelliousness in some students. These rebels were often sensitive and perceptive, and the combination of fierce independence and acute aesthetic awareness marked them as candidates for an education in the arts. So Forrister (sometimes) recruited them into his program to equip them with additional resources for maintaining an internal aesthetic playground for guarding

the silence of their secret spaces against the noisy distractions of the larger culture. (p. 136)

The qualities of being and teaching that a strong poet teacher brings to the classroom can indeed touch eternity through the enduring effects on a student's life. Thus, our second sphere of possibility for teacher preparation in the arts is to encourage the strong poet in teachers. Modeling a strong poet life (if we have one) is one path. Another is to recommend and assign readings beyond arts education, books like Mary Rose O'Reilley's (1993) *The Peaceable Classroom*, Nel Noddings' (1992) *The Challenge to Care in Schools: An Alternative Approach to Education*, Parker Palmer's (1998) *The Courage to Teach*, Tom Barone's (2001) *Touching Eternity*, and Thomas Moore's (1992) *Care of the Soul*. Reading these books restored our commitment to teacher education and continues to guide our work with future teachers. A teaching practice that honours creativity and imagination and that offers significant choice in course content, assignments and presentation models helps to support the "internal aesthetic playground" that builds the strong poet in preservice teachers.

Aesthetic Playground

Dictionary definitions of *aesthetic* generally miss the mark. They speak of aesthetic as "appreciation of the beautiful" and of aesthetics as "the philosophy of the beautiful or of art." More helpful is the etymological root of the word, the Greek *aisthetikos* meaning "things perceptible to the senses." Even more helpful is to consider the opposite of aesthetic: *anaesthetic*. Indeed, we all understand the term *anaesthetic* to mean absence of sensation, dead to sensation. The aesthetic

dimension can then be understood as the heightened life of the senses.

Dissanayake's (1995) examination of the place of the aesthetic dimension in human life presents the view that the essence of art is "making special" (p. 39). She theorizes that the root of all artistic activity, past and present, is to enhance particular aspects of the world and humanity by lifting it out of the ordinary and "making [it] special," whether it be with a birthday cake, a sculpture, or a Shakespearean play. Thomas Moore (1996) speaks of art in a similar vein. "I often imagine mythology, the arts, and philosophy as creating a resonating chamber, like the body of a guitar or violin, allowing ordinary actions to have increased sonority and intensity" (p. 220).

Our third sphere of possibility lies in supporting an aesthetic playground in the lives of teachers. Playgrounds are generally thought to be relatively safe and joyful places to play. They often include play equipment such as swings and slides for communal and individual play. In an aesthetic playground, a person alone or in community could play in the realm of the senses - with word, image, sound, and movement. It would be a place and time in which a person is free to feel, to create, and to respond in an atmosphere of acceptance, free from hurtful criticism. Play tends to be self-directed and often results in a suspension of the sense of time.

Ways to encourage the aesthetic playground include nudging people away from the rational realm, providing materials to encourage aesthetic play, and valuing the imagination equally with knowledge. One strategy for nudging minds in this direction is to present alternate perspectives. Some examples of short aphorisms about art and the aesthetic dimension that upset our rational perspective are:

A mind too active is no mind at all.
(Theodore Roethke) (as cited in web site:
Roger's Quotes, n. d.)

I shut [my] eyes in order to see. (Paul Gauguin) (as cited in web site: Terry's Page, n. d.)

The most beautiful thing we can experience is the mysterious. It is the source of all true art and science. (Albert Einstein) (as cited in web site: Roger's Quotes, n. d.)

What shakes the eye but the invisible? (Theodore Roethke) (as cited in: Abe Deuschendorf's Favorite Quotes, n. d.)

The job of the artist is always to deepen the mystery. (Francis Bacon) (1963, as cited in web site: MusicThoughts)

Materials for encouraging aesthetic play include exposure to various art forms, support for skill development and knowledge in chosen arts forms, endorsement of imaginative thinking and endeavour, and provision of time. Maxine Greene (1995) suggests that

We are fully present to arts when we understand what there is to be noticed in the work at hand, release our imaginations to create orders in the field of what is perceived, and allow our feelings to illuminate what is there to be realized. (p. 138)

Valuing the imagination equally with knowledge might include, among other strategies, giving the arts equal time and effort as other curricular subjects, rewarding imaginative efforts, allowing messy space and time, and asking open-ended questions rather than questions for which we already know the answer.

Deepening the Mystery

One of the aspects of arts experience that for the most part goes unacknowledged in schools is the spiritual dimension. The arts have long been understood as connective tissue between the realms of the known and

unknown and between the worlds of the spirit and the material. The unknown is often a place of mystery. Teacher experience and knowledge of the connection between arts and the mysterious or the spiritual is another of our spheres of possibility. Moore (1992) provides the following illustration:

If we see ourselves as a puzzle to be solved, then we will be satisfied with rational explanations, but if we see ourselves as made up of unfathomable mysteries, then we will need images that are not excessively reductive. A good artistic presentation will lead us deeper into confusion, and help us feel the chaos of life more vividly than ever. (p. 198)

In a world that tends toward polarization of right and wrong and of true and false, the arts provide balance by honouring ambiguity, multiple possibilities, unanswered and even unanswerable questions. The novelist James Baldwin (1962) says the greatest achievement of art is "the laying bare of questions which have been hidden by the answers" (p. 17).

Art making draws our creative spirits to the surface and beyond. If we regard the creative spirit within each of us as one face of the Divine, then our creative work becomes a form of spiritual practice. Our art making becomes a window to the Divine within ourselves and within all other living beings.

This sphere of possibility means that, as teacher educators, we need to acknowledge the spiritual dimension in arts experience, in order that teachers, in turn, will acknowledge the spiritual dimension in their students' lives. Acknowledgement can simply be awareness and openness to the realms beyond the senses where mystery and spirit prevail.

"As If" Worlds

For many years, Maxine Greene (1995) has written about the relationship between the arts,

the imagination, and social change.

Not always, but oftentimes, the extent to which we grasp another's world depends on our existing ability to make poetic use of our imagination, to bring into being the "as if" worlds created by writers, painters, sculptors, filmmakers, choreographers, and composers, and to be in some manner a participant in artists' worlds reaching far back and ahead in time. (p. 4)

We would hope that arts educators would understand that people's abilities to imagine "as if" worlds are critical in creating solutions to social injustice in schools, communities, and countries. We believe that teaching in all curriculum areas must be an ecological (Jardine, 1998) and peacemaking (O'Reilley, 1993) activity. Mary Rose O'Reilley spoke of how she reformed her teaching after one of her colleagues asked, "Is it possible to teach English so people stop killing each other?" Greene (1995) suggests that the arts can, in fact, open new possibilities for social change, that responses and solutions other than vengeance can be imagined by those "as if" worlds" (p. 4). Einstein's words "Imagination is more important than knowledge" now appear on mugs, bumper stickers, and refrigerator magnets. Our fifth sphere of possibility is to help teachers really understand, believe, and act on the directions in which their imaginations might take them.

Teachers as Learners

What we want to cultivate in preservice teachers is the disposition towards continual learning in both their professional and personal lives. Continual learning would include, for example, the kinds of in-service learning we've spoken of throughout this

paper and the challenges we present in this section - to learn from their students, to respond to societal changes, to expand their view of what constitutes their art, and to become beginning learners themselves.

Creativity 2000 (Ottawa, June 2000) was one of the Millennium Conferences on Creativity in the Arts and Sciences. Dr. Peter Hackett, the distinguished chemical physicist and Vice President (Research) of the National Research Council of Canada, began his address to the delegates by saying, "Rather than asking what we should teach our children, we might better ask ourselves what we should learn from them" (cited in Doyle, 2001). This idea is not new to any of us. We hear it and agree with it and then we proceed to plan the curriculum and "teach it." What would it mean to really learn from our students?

In her study of how popular musicians learn, Lucy Green (in press) examined the nature of popular musicians' informal learning practices, attitudes and values. Even though we earlier argued the value of resisting pop culture, there are lessons to be learned from serious creative endeavour in every genre. She interviewed 14 popular musicians living in and around London, England, ages 15 to 19. The ways those popular musicians acquired skills and knowledge included:

- being immersed in the music and musical practices of one's surroundings,
- copying recordings by ear (the main learning practice),
- playing with peers who consciously share knowledge and skills,
- watching and imitating others during music making,
- practising five or six hours a day in the early stages but only so long as they enjoy it, and
- using musical elements effectively without knowing the theoretical language.

Fewer than half of the pop musicians used notation and when they did it was always

heavily influenced by listening and copying. The concept of instrumental or singing technique, the conventional aspects of controlling the instrument, came late, in many cases after they had become professionals. Their learning strategies were vastly different from typical school music learning. Green listened to and learned from these young self-taught popular musicians, and then she offered some tentative suggestions for formal music education:

- more general listening for enculturation purposes,
- more emphasis on peer-directed learning,
- relax a bit about “good” technique and daily practice in the early stages,
- be prepared to let learners follow their own interests, and
- allow the learning about theory to be led by the music itself, music the students know and enjoy.

Green realizes that “many of the approaches would require the confidence to be inactive rather than pro-active, a confidence which is likely to arise in two ways: (a) further research and (b) formally trained teachers trying out informal learning practices for themselves.”

One aspect of this sphere of possibility, teachers as learners, lies in teachers’ willingness to learn from their students. Another aspect of teachers as learners is teachers’ ability to embrace societal changes and respond in suitable and possibly new ways. John Sloboda (in press) has taken seriously the world in which young people live and offers some suggestions from that vantage point. He explained the shaking of the foundations of music education in this way. However, we have taken the liberty of substituting *arts* for *music* as follows:

[Arts] education in schools cannot function effectively without an implicit

agreement between stakeholders (e.g., teachers, students, parents, governments, etc.) about what it is for. The meaning of [arts] is a constantly shifting function of the discourses of these diverse groups, which may coalesce around a “dominant ideology” which gains enough inter-group consensus to generate a stable educational agenda. I would argue that such a stable agenda existed in mid-20th Century [arts] education, but its underpinning consensus collapsed as a result of major cultural shifts, most evident from the 1960s onwards.

Some of the cultural shifts Sloboda identified are multiculturalism, youth culture, electronic communication, feminism, secularism, niche cultures and postmodernism. He suggests that in England a national curriculum for music “was probably introduced at the very moment in history when its sustainability has never been less certain.” Sloboda concluded that the key concept in a viable arts education for today’s students is variety - variety in providers, in funding, in locations, in roles for educators, in trajectories, in activities, in accreditation, and in routes to teacher competence. Many of his ideas fly in the face of current arts education practices and policies. Three of Sloboda’s suggestions are relevant in the present context.

First, teacher educators must consider adopting a wider range and variety of roles so that beginning teachers in turn might bring these roles to schools. In the case of music education, Sloboda suggests the following roles: “teacher, amateur, coach, mentor, impresario, fund-raiser, programmer, composer, arranger, and studio manager.”

Second, today’s students need a variety of paths towards arts engagement. Teacher education programmes should include long-term courses, for some, and short-term projects for others, depending on the needs and parameters of both the students and the project, “rather than be subject to the tyranny of the school term or year.”

Third, a wider variety of activities will respect the wide range of teacher candidates' and students' musical and artistic experience: workshops, talks, program planning, the business of arts, assistance in new and varied art forms such as DJing, performance art, and CD ROM production.

Arts educators also need to be willing to expand their own views of what constitutes *art*. Forrister, the Appalachian art teacher we spoke of earlier, taught the following in his high school visual-arts program: macramé, pottery, fibers, weaving, drawing, photography, silk-screening, papermaking, batik, stitchery, quilting, lettering, and airbrushing (Barone, 2001, p. 13). Music education now includes, in addition to the traditional trio of choir, band and orchestra, computer-assisted composition, steel band, fiddle, folk music, popular music, musics from many cultures, jazz band, jazz choir, Orff, Kodaly, Dalcroze Eurhythmics, guitar, synthesized music, technological enhancement of sound, and more. No one person can be expected to provide leadership in all the diverse disciplines and fields. Teachers can, however, accept the burgeoning fields in arts education and experience and be willing to find alternate ways to support student learning in areas of their own nonspecialty. Some strategies include peer teaching (e.g., guitar or computer orchestration), inviting local artists to give workshops, becoming involved in teacher-artist programs at the school and community levels, taking students to visit production houses and studios, and offering a variety of short units throughout the year from which students choose a required number - not unlike the Teachers as Artists professional development model we described earlier.

As teacher educators, we need to provide both beginning and experienced teachers with such models.

One strategy we have used consistently to encourage teacher candidates and graduate students to become learners in the arts is to make the one assignment for the course consist of each student learning a self-chosen new skill, often something the student has "always wanted to learn how to do" (e.g., twig furniture making, welding, Tai Chi, mime, watercolours). We also ask the students to document their learning process in some way. This assignment serves two important purposes, although students report many additional benefits. It provides experience in being a novice learner and it gives most students both new confidence in, and excitement about, learning new things.

Concluding Thoughts: The Need for Multiple Approaches for Strong Poets

Cultures are judged on the basis of their arts. Most cultures and historical eras have not doubted the importance of including the arts as part of every child's education. They are time-honored ways of learning, knowing, and expressing. (Cromie, 2000)

To say that the arts are universal across cultures and time does not mean that they are in any way uniform. Rather it means that approaches to teaching the arts ought not to be uniform either. Fundamentally, what is required for arts education is a series of comprehensive and flexible approaches to learning about, through, and in the arts, as Sloboda (in press) has argued for reasons outlined earlier and as we emphasize here for reasons that are even more broadly based.

Thus far, we have concentrated on the individual teacher in describing our spheres of

possibilities. We now turn to the broader issue of arts education approaches and programs. Indeed, there are a number of successful programs, worldwide, that allow the strong poet teachers to explore the arts successfully with their students. Vagianos (1999) has described many such Canadian programs in a document prepared for the Laidlaw Foundation. A striking American example is that of a major arts-restoration effort in New York City that involves partnerships between artists, arts organizations, and the combined expertise of specialist and generalist teachers. (See <http://www.nycenet.edu>.) The NYC project has led to the restoration of arts dollars restored to base funds and to high standards being set across art forms with expectations for (a) creating, performing, and participating, (b) understanding and utilizing resources and materials, and learning the skills and techniques associated with the art form, (c) analyzing and responding to works of art [a place where the generalist teachers play a central role], and (d) understanding the cultural and aesthetic dimensions of art in historical and contemporary terms.

Themes that emerge, time and again, in the literature suggest that there are common elements to successful approaches to arts education (Burton, Horowitz, & Abeles, 2000; Eisner, 2001; Green, in press; Upitis, Smithrim, Meban, & Patteson, 2000). An education rich in the arts

- nurtures imagination and creativity;
- prepares students and their teachers to live with ambiguity;
- helps students learn to make judgments;
- prepares students to live in a democratic society;
- helps develop understanding of multiple perspectives;
- keeps students interested in school, and more important, in learning;

- gives students tools, beyond words, to express what they think, feel, and know;
- enriches students' lives with beauty and joy; and
- avoids a civilization marked by mediocrity.

Programs and approaches in schools that have been successful include several of the following dimensions:

- clear definitions of roles and responsibilities for generalist and specialist teachers, with possibilities for exercising imagination within those roles;
- links with teacher-education programs;
- partnerships with local artists and arts organizations;
- opportunities for students to create, to perform, and to attend performances and exhibitions;
- recognition of cultural and aesthetic dimensions of art making;
- learning in and/or through and/or about the arts;
- full-school implementation of arts initiatives;
- recognition by administrators of the importance of the arts;
- learning marked by complexity and risk;
- extended engagement in the artistic process;
- professional development for teachers; and,
- infusion of the arts into the school and broader community.

In summary, professional development opportunities of the type we have described and the financial resources to support the arts (although, to paraphrase Einstein, "Imagination is more important than money") are needed in addition to the curricula rich with ways for learning through, about, and in the arts. Fundamentally, it is necessary for faculties of education to treat the arts as "core." This would entail treating the arts as "core" subjects in the elementary program, that is, by ensuring that teacher education programs do not make the arts an "elective" and by ensuring that the same

number of class hours are devoted to the individual arts subjects as to, for example, science or social studies. It would also involve raising the standards for admission or creating corequisites to ensure that both future generalist elementary teachers and secondary arts specialists have adequate background preparation in the arts. Faculties of education might also create Centres for Arts Education to attract future teachers, provide in-service, and support graduate studies in arts education. In addition to the curriculum initiatives, it is vital that some faculty members are actively involved in carrying out research to determine the value of arts education and broadly communicating the results of such research to ministries of education and other government representatives, boards of education, arts organizations, and leaders in the business community. More generally, faculties of education must lead in pushing the limits of curriculum reform through both specialized and integrated curriculum approaches and by using both traditional means and new technologies. Finally, the provision of professional development opportunities for generalist and specialist teachers, through partnerships with teacher organizations, artists, arts organizations, and others in the community is a role that faculties of education could naturally play to support the work in the arts both within the faculty and beyond its walls.

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