Finding Artistic Voice: Expressive Critiques Embedded in Teacher Education

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Overview

I don’t think we, as individuals, nor as members of society, can appreciate the value of art until we create some ourselves (elementary teacher education candidate, personal communication, December 4, 2006).

This statement was written by an undergraduate sophomore completing a required artistic project in her first pre-service elementary teacher education class. Soon after a classroom observation, she expressed her understanding through a painting that included vibrant colors and torn colored tissue papers representing the challenges of teaching to a diverse classroom. She was both intimidated and invigorated by the assignment.

Many students in education programs never engage in an artistic experience. Typically, they complete their requirements through writing, oral presentations, seminar discussions, internships, and student teaching. In my classes I have inserted expressive critiques that ask students to demonstrate their reactions and understanding of classroom observations and topics discussed in class through a visual or performance art medium.

The many varied responses to my assigned expressive critiques made me wonder: How do I respond to theorists who envision new skills and dispositions for 21st century learning? How do my curriculum choices impact those who wish to become teachers and who may not identify themselves as artists? How does my assignment “expressive critiques” challenge prospective teachers’ paradigms and change their approach to teaching? Since a few of my colleagues have followed me and bravely incorporated expressive critiques into their curriculum I wondered what they have learned about their students and how my choices influenced their own teaching practice. How has my pedagogy influenced the culture of our teacher education program if at all?

This paper examines the process and implications of finding artistic voice for undergraduate and graduate students in a teacher education program in Northern New England. As a teacher educator my educational philosophy and pedagogy are all exposed to examination. By inserting artistic activities into required education courses I humbly convey what I value in education. My beliefs are grounded by the vision of others. Pink (2005) compels us as a society to embrace right brain thinking. Because we live in a world with abundance and automation now is the time for conceptual thinking that includes aesthetic perception, empathy, narrative, and play. Although he never mentions teacher education his vision advocates the indispensible role for creativity and innovation in 21st century learning. Eisner (2002) addresses the need to cultivate sensibilities that help our students discern visual qualities. He, like Dewey (1934), believes that the imagination leads to a more engaged mind and that arts across curriculum provide access to meaningful experiences. I join Csikszentmihalyi (1997 and Gardner (1993) in a conviction that the skills, thoughtfulness and understanding learned through the arts demonstrate intelligence and literacy that we expect from other disciplines.
Like Greene (1995) I believe that teachers who develop their own artistic voices create an environment of civility, encourage critical and creative thinking, perceive the world peripherally, and open themselves up to different forms of reality. Much of the reality that children experience is a visual culture that influences perception. Unpacking previous assumptions, encountering identity, critically analyzing visual texts, and creating new visual representations that communicate individual perspective are among the goals needed for teachers to effectively attend to a vast and complex visual culture (Freedman, 2003).

According to Murray (1993) classroom teachers need professional development that affirms the arts as a viable language and context to interpret understanding and to gain perspective on teaching identity. Oreck (2004) described how many classroom teachers do not use the arts in the classroom even though they believe the arts to be important. His research indicated that self image as artist and lack of professional development influenced prospective and current teachers' likelihood of integrating arts into the curriculum. With early and consistent exposure to the arts classroom teachers are more likely to gain confidence including arts in their own classrooms (Oreck, 2004) and collaborate on creative projects with other colleagues (Quinn, 2006).

I am encouraged by other teacher educators who opened themselves up and discovered the value of including arts activities in their curriculum (Berghoff, Borgmann, & Parr, 2005; Joshee, 2003; Zwinn & Graham, 2005). These educators took risks through different artistic mediums to advocate how teaching through the art lead to authentic learning. They propelled me to reflect on my own practice of helping prospective teachers find artistic voice. It is my hope that by examining the reactions of students in my classes as well as by colleagues in the education department where I teach, I offer insight to those educators committed to such worthy dispositions as imagination, peripheral perception, and empathy and seek innovative approaches to academic leadership in the 21st century.

Description of Activity

I teach required introductory courses to those aspiring to be teachers: elementary, secondary, art, teaching English as a second language (ESL), and special education. These introductory courses, Schools and Society for undergraduates and The Decision to Teach for graduate students, address educational topics that include curriculum, assessment, foundation and history, classroom management, special education, and technology. In addition, students are expected to complete 3 hours a week of classroom observation and teach one lesson to their peers.

In the first class of the semester I aim to jar students’ assumptions on what it means to be a student and on the role of teacher. A kinesthetic exercise where students move around the room and express various emotions and individual experience with schools initiates our introduction to each other. In the next few weeks, students collaborate on an in-class artistic interpretation of a topic or an assigned reading. This is designed to give them some experience before they complete two expressive critiques later in the semester. The first, half way through the semester, focuses on a classroom observation. The other is a synthesis from their semester’s learning presented at the last class. Slam poetry, paintings, mixed media sculpture, game boards, Shakespeare type sonnets, folk sing-a-long, mosaics, and dance are examples of media chosen by students.

Students are told they have 5 minutes to present their expressive critiques which include time for feedback. I use the Critical Response Model (Lerman and Borstel, 2003) which is a multi-step critique
designed by choreographer Liz Lerman which I have adapted for visual arts as well as performing arts. The steps are as follows: Affirmation (viewers offer positive impressions), Artist as Questioner (artists ask specific questions based on artistic choices and intent), Responders ask Questions (viewer’s questions are neutral and designed to learn from the artist), and Opinion Time (with artist’s permission viewer suggests an opinion). Students prepare one question connected to their choices as artist to initiate feedback: eg; “how did my use of line reflect my observation of gender inequity in the classroom.” Students are assessed on three criteria that I chose from the National Standards of Art Education (1994) and the Vermont Framework of Standards and Learning Opportunities (2006). The week following their presentation, students turn in a one page self assessment. I inform students that I apply the same integrity of critical reflection to expressive critiques as I do to written pieces: conveying intent, applying artistic elements in a chosen medium, and taking risk for learning.

For this paper I draw upon reflections from over 250 undergraduate and graduate students who have taken my courses between 2002 and 2007. I use prospective teachers' journals, class discussions, and observations to enlighten me on how the expressive critiques influenced their perceptions on education and teacher identity. In addition, through surveys, interviews, and classroom observations I examine the insight of six colleagues who have adapted expressive critiques into their courses. Two colleagues use expressive critiques in the same courses I teach: Schools and Society and The Decision to Teach. Expressive critiques have also found their way into other required classes prior to student teaching including Child Development, Differentiated Curriculum, Adolescent Development, and The Inclusive Classroom. As an example of an adaptation of expressive critiques one colleague chose to have one critique in a visual art medium and the other in a performance.

From my observations and reflections I synthesize four steps that prospective teachers experience to find artistic voice: overcoming artistic anxiety and fear; risking imagination and perception; engaging in the creative process; and re-envisioning self as practitioner. Although somewhat sequential these steps overlap and can be concurrent. I also present insight on how expressive critiques influenced my colleagues’ perceptions of students, their pedagogy, and the culture of our program. My paper concludes with implications for creating teacher identity and thoughts on how the arts contribute to academic leadership and teacher education programs. When using quotes from students I indicate their licensure programs to demonstrate the range of students who shared responses. I use prospective teachers, student teachers, and students synonymously.

Teachers Finding Artistic Voice

Overcoming Artistic Anxiety and Fear

Sometimes I can’t help feeling that you designed this class to test me. Just the word ‘expressive’ makes the sound of my heart beating reverberate in my entire body. Everything about the assignment terrified me (secondary English, personal communication, April 30, 2005).

This assignment was not meant to terrify as much as expand the possibilities of communication for those destined to teach. Yet, there were many in my (and my colleagues’) classes who commented on their anxiety communicating through the arts, presenting something so personal in front of peers, and having such openness in an assignment. When reading the words “expressive critique” in the syllabus, one undergraduate student in the elementary program “instantly panicked, wanting to be given specific instructions where it is easier to know whether a task was properly accomplished” (personal
Other students indicated that they were intimidated with the thought of having to be creative and acknowledged that expressive pieces were harder to conceive than a three page paper.

To address this assignment, students took inventory of their history making art and their confidence with the creative process. The memory of past failed experiences, the separation and de-emphasizing of the subject art from other subjects, and the perceived gap between master work and their own art contributed to a feeling of disenfranchisement for many. Whether they believed their work resembled a seventh grade mastery of colored pencils or lamented that it had been many years since there was time and energy to be artistic, most undergraduate and graduate licensure candidates found ways to disclaim their abilities. Many confessed that they had lost touch with their creative voices.

Over 75% of course evaluations mentioned that overcoming the anxiety of completing expressive critiques transformed their thinking about teaching. Specifically, prospective teachers noted how expressive critiques helped them transcend personal parameters and confront their self-image as learners. For some it was the novelty of using an artistic form to communicate thoughts; for others it was “the vulnerability of standing in front of the class and reading my poem for 5 minutes, with possible rejection from peers” (Secondary math, personal communication, December 1, 2005). Initially, many students resented the intimacy of an art interpretation. Yet, it is just that intimacy that led students to re-invent their self-image as teachers. After accepting that the assignment was not going away and redirecting their energy from fear to exploration, students began to engage their imaginations and take risks.

Risking Imagination and Perception

I perceived the boundary associated with risk and at some point I crossed it! (E.S.L., personal communication, December 5, 2006)

To overcome their fear some prospective teachers needed assurance that they would be supported in their efforts. They needed to know that their explorations would be accepted and trust that their efforts would lead to self discovery. Many asserted that the more they believed in what they were saying the less intimidating it became. For example, a middle school English teacher candidate changed her attitude from initial resistance to a feeling that she had something to say that was “too important to hide, even at the risk of failure” as she presented a skit on classroom management (personal communication, November 2, 2005).

Perhaps, because expressive critiques pushed students to take risks, they also promoted a personal and emotional connection to learning. Playing guitar for the first time in five years, an elementary licensure candidate claimed that “this experience was cathartic and brutally honest; the emotions were stronger than if I had only talked of them in a paper” (personal communication, November 2, 2005). Exposing personal meaning to the scrutiny of others was unfamiliar territory. “I just had to open the door, let people in, and not be inhibited by what others might think of standardizing curriculum for test results” (elementary, personal communication, May 3, 2003).

By using their imaginations to raise awareness of classroom situations, discerning perspective and possibilities on educational issues, and exploring new ways to communicate ideas these prospective teachers cultivated what Abowitz (2007) described as moral perception. They negotiated between an
experience (what they observed in the classroom) and self (what they assumed based on their history and beliefs) and then found a voice to convey their encounters (Abowitz, 2007). As one secondary English teacher exclaimed, “I became passionate and personally invested in what I communicate and how I communicate.” Finding artistic voice helped these students link imagination with reflective inquiry (Dewey, 1934). They assumed the emotional risk that challenges assumptions and stretched their individual perspective to outside worlds (Sewall, 1999).

Engaging in the Creative Process

I realized the power of reading my story in a different way, for example, in the dark with only one flashlight. I wanted the class to be captivated by the mood of a fully engaged classroom (ESL, personal communication, April 30, 2005).

Whether considering the audience, revising a script, acquiescing to be less literal, or exploring new ways to use kinesthetic intelligence, students moved from fear and risk taking to absorption in the creative process. Some students indicated the importance of using the elements and principles of a particular medium to express a point of view. The ESL student above, for example, learned about timing, blocking, and pacing to complete his critique. Conveying meaning in a form other than writing pushed students to find new structures within which to work. Experimentation led to discoveries and further inquiry.

Through the completion of a second expressive critique prospective teachers synthesized previous experience and discerned for themselves the criteria that would enrich their work. An elementary school candidate “used trial and error to complete a painting on how multicultural education was only partially infused into the classroom” (personal communication, December 3, 2006). Initially, students felt the urge to explain their work. The Critical Response Process (CRP) helped students affirm their artistic exploration and learn to let the artwork speak for itself (Lerman and Borstel, 2003). Through CRP students received feedback based on initial intent. To many the discussions following the expressive critiques enriched their understanding of how the creative process can help individuals express a particular point of view. Students noted how they revised their work based on what they believed their critiques would communicate to others. They learned that the process to create artistic representations requires integrity and absorption. A secondary English teacher wondered how his mime performance on special needs students would be accessible. After the critique he recognized that more convincing gestures and pacing would have enhanced the perspective of audience (personal communication, December 1, 2006). CRP motivated students to not only care for and communicate meaningfully about their work but to become inspired by the interpretations of others. Nearly all students commented on how artistic problem solving became easier second time around. Through immersion into the creative process and participation in CRP prospective teachers enriched their vision of teaching.

Re-envisioning Self as Practitioner

The most important thing I can teach my students is to be able to uncover something new in familiar things, to appreciate the wonder of a different perspective, and to enjoy being lost and confused once in a while (secondary English, personal communication, December 10, 2007)

By participating in creative exploration and critical reflection these prospective teachers observed themselves as learners, and connected these self discoveries to their emerging identities and
philosophies as teachers. A future secondary science teacher noticed the similarity between her own fear of an artistic endeavor and that of a student who might feel a similar apprehension about engaging in science. Comparing herself to “an actor who needs to engage an audience” she concluded that “the pathway to critical thinking is to engage a student’s interest” (personal communication, November 15, 2005). With new trust in her creative process, one special educator candidate envisioned herself and her students “capable of performing and projecting an idea without words.” She observed her own ability to “show moods and emotions in the absence of speech and feeling the importance of independent thought” (personal communication, April 30, 2006).

If educators seek to awaken their students with the capacity to wonder then they need to believe in their capacity to imagine (Greene, 1995). As expressed by one secondary social studies licensure candidate, “We need to engage in our own imagination to liberate and foster the creative process for the students we have in the future” (personal communication, April 30, 2006). All prospective teachers noted how the expressive critiques changed “our” classroom culture and propelled them to think about education environments differently. Based on their experience students acknowledged the importance of establishing a safe learning environment, one that promotes creative energy, risk taking, and imagination and includes all learners. They also identified the commitment, flexibility, and enthusiasm needed to orchestrate artistic projects that may have less predictable parameters than other classroom activities.

Perceptions from Colleagues

These students discovered experientially that there are multiple paths to knowledge, understanding, and teaching (colleague, personal communication, July 15, 2007).

All six colleagues who adapted the expressive critiques for use in their classes commented on the thoughtfulness of student work in general, insight they learned about individual students (that they wouldn’t otherwise have known), the respect students gave to each other, and the willingness by which students offered personal perspective on key educational issues that stimulated classroom dialogue. Like their students, my colleagues reflected on their history as learners and teachers. Labeling herself as a “language-based person” a special educator instructor acknowledged how this assignment took her out of her comfort zone. A secondary specialist in language arts talked of her ‘awe’ in observing her students’ honesty, openness, and talent. She continued: “Each time I uncovered more about my students I took on an approach to create authentic learning communities; I hope I can respond with integrity” (personal communication, July, 15, 2007).

One colleague shared his own expressive critiques early in the semester. By doing so he modeled the risk taking and vulnerability he asked of his students. His goal was to “stretch all class members beyond their comfort zone.” For him, the expressive critiques nurtured the dispositions he believes are essential for teacher education programs: risk, humility, and creativity. He concluded, “Great teachers use expressive methods” (personal communication, June 14, 2006).

My colleagues found that the process not only enriched the experience of students but helped them think differently about their own teaching and the classroom culture they want to create. Although they recognized initial student trepidation, my colleagues accredited expressive critiques with helping to create an open and supportive environment. One colleague exemplified this as he began the class when students first shared their work by saying, “You all found this difficult, you are all not artists, you are
all nervous, you took a big risk artistically, you thought outside the box, and we will all be supportive of your efforts” (personal communication, October 15, 2006). They all agreed that their classes coalesced more after the first round of student presentations.

Expressive critiques posed challenges for my colleagues. They had to learn how to find meaningful time for students to present and receive feedback about their work, often at the expense of another activity. Two wondered how to help their students think about the expressive projects while not being overly obsessed and intimidated. The instructor of a special education course, *The Inclusive Classroom*, struggled to understand how expressive critiques could balance in-depth investigation with diversified perspective. Not surprisingly, each acknowledged their trepidation with an ‘open’ assignment and the uncertainty on how to assess artistic interpretations. Nonetheless, all continued to adapt expressive critiques to their curriculum as they modeled the process of finding teaching voice. They also acknowledged how expressive critiques have become an indispensable component of our teaching education program which strives to offer students a diverse and comprehensive approach to teaching and learning. There was certainly no pressure to include expressive critiques; my colleagues thoughtfully modified their instruction based on both what they heard from students and what they perceived to enrich their curriculum.

Conclusion

My background as an artist and art educator shapes my bias that active art-making cultivates imagination, sensibility, and empathy. In my art education courses I teach students who share my passion for the arts. In *Schools and Society* and *The Decision to Teach*, I work with students whose experience with and comfort in the arts ranges considerably. For many undergraduate and graduate students, engaging in the creative process and expressing insight artistically are distant memories. Whether preparing for secondary science, middle level language arts, or an elementary classroom, the prospective teachers I work with overcame artistic anxiety, took risks with their imaginations and perceptions, engaged in the creative process, and re-envisioned themselves as practitioners. As one future special educator surmised, “this activity brought the class together and challenged us to open our minds to learning and expressing ourselves in new ways” (personal communication, November 30, 2006). Expressive critiques offered students a fresh approach to their emerging pedagogy. The “unpredictability of such an assignment is its strength and forces me to be on my toes,” reflected an elementary teacher candidate (personal communication, December 3, 2006).

This unpredictability of the expressive critiques opened my colleagues’ and my eyes to honor the gifts of our students and enticed us to challenge our own practice. Ideally, my colleagues and I modeled how learning from other’s knowledge and skills help create a vibrant educational community. By including expressive critiques my colleagues demonstrated how teaching is a work-in-progress: philosophy, learning objectives, instructional strategies, and assessment continue to be refined. It is my hope that expressive critiques contribute to the lifelong professional development suggested by Oreck (2004) that sustains the vitality of the arts for classroom teachers.

The cultivation of humanity, as Nussbaum (1997) reminds us, requires a public that practices Marcus Aurelius’ “sympathetic imagination” where there is a cultivating of one’s own judgment, a witnessing of how others view the world, and an emphasis on learning perception. Expressive critiques offer future teachers a practical exercise to suspend habits and assumptions and use a language to express their
own critical voice (Desai and Chalmers, 2007). Creating art in the context of understanding education nourishes the imagination, reflectivity, and compassion that we seek for all teachers and that lead to exemplary academic leaders. Certainly, I would be amiss to assert that these teachers were ready to confidently integrate the arts with integrity and instill sympathetic imagination in all students. Further investigation of the long term impact of expressive critiques and more detailed description of individual narratives would contribute to knowledge on the impact of these teachers’ experiences on their curriculum and students.

Nevertheless, by participating as artists and connecting their discoveries to their vision as practitioners, these prospective teachers have a greater chance of dispelling the myths of inadequacies and embedding the arts into the lives of their students. Expressing artistic voice reconnects prospective teachers and teacher education instructors alike with their own stories and cultivates valid ways to approach learning.

References


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