Allowing Myself Room To Speak: 
The Journey Of An Artist/Teacher

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Abstract: This paper explores one artist/teacher’s experience in the journey to arts education. In navigating multiple identities, the author explores and gives voice to the loss and gain of considering self as artist and teacher, and the freedom necessary to linger within those experiences. It is this contact with our own storied lives that leads to a greater understanding of self and allows us to be in correspondence with others, teaching and living more effectively. Here, the author allows herself the space to question, to linger, and to remember the stories that have led to more whole consideration of self as learner, teacher, artist, and researcher; inviting the reader to do the same.
To Begin

I know living entails searching being in constant process. It is about seeking out who I want to be and what I believe is important. As an artist, researcher, and teacher, I find myself attempting to not only define where I am in that search, but looking for connections in a world that demands definitions, declarations, and concreteness. Must one identity take precedence? Is it possible to identify ourselves in a spirit of multiplicity? I would assert that without a conscious connection to our self and our developing identity, we lose the ability to correspond within the creative process. As an artist I strongly believe in the potential of the creative process and its power to hold us in reflection of our selves and our actions. As a teacher of education and the arts I see the power we each have to affect the lives of others and the influence our context has on our development. As a researcher, I continually look for ways to understand these ideas and make connections through relationships, theory, practice, the visual, the lived, and through metaphor. All of these identities entwined begin to tell the story of how I, now an assistant professor of arts education, see the validity, complexity, necessity, and urgency of a life lived within creative process.

Navigating multiple identities, I find myself constantly falling in and out of definitions of who I am and what I do. I would venture to say this falling in and out is a common feature of figuring out who we all are as individuals. For this particular journey together, I invite the reader to consider the thoughts of theorists, my experiences, and your own opportunities to not choose a single lens, but to consider the power and freedom we each can choose to actively engage in becoming and to return to the question of why we do what we do. This creative venture entails choosing and embracing a freedom that already exists in the world, realizing and facing the loss we feel when the falling in and out of identities occurs, and finally, lingering within our personal histories where we look for clues as to who we are. Within the notion of choosing freedom, I bring together ideas that encourage the rethinking of claiming steadfast beliefs in a moving and changing world and end with a sensory experience and questions concerning how we reach such awareness. The section titled “Effective Loss” touches on the frustrations embedded in the idea of “effectiveness” and a felt sense of loss that led to a need for lingering. The final section, titled Choosing to Linger, is the manifestation of my desire to reclaim my identities and tell my own story. I believe it is this contact with our own storied lives that leads to a greater understanding of self and allows us to be in correspondence with others. In this paper, I am allowing myself the space to do that and I encourage others to consider that opportunity as well.

The Freedom We Can Choose

Decker Walker (2003) and Maxine Greene (1995) describe the accessible freedom we can choose to uphold as educators. Both pieces remind me of the journey education has been on and how it continues to evolve (and how it can resist change as well.) Walker brings to the forefront a continuing battle between progressive and traditional philosophies in an effort to better understand where we are today. Most educators that I am familiar with would probably place themselves in the progressive camp that Walker describes as being one that helps “individuals to learn to think for themselves” and take “pleasure in the passing of the oldest traditions, because these leave room for something new to emerge, more adapted to current and future circumstances” (p. 66). Progressives look for change and embrace the evolving society that schools exist within, hoping that serving students becomes a task more possible within the current knowledge of the day. As David Hansen (2001) would interject, though, traditions are different from traditionalism. In Exploring the Moral Heart of Teaching he quotes Jaroslav Pelikan (1984) in saying, “Tradition is the living faith of the death” and “traditionalism is the dead faith of the living.” Hansen reminds us in this work that while charting new courses and embarking into the unknown, one must remember, “they cannot chart that course from nowhere...a practice and a tradition go hand-in-hand” (p. 117).

Greene (1995) sheds light on the in-between that exists in this progressive-traditionalist debate. She states that, “We must take into account the languages of technology and violence, even as we do the miseducation in much that is done in schools...By their very nature, they make it extraordinarily difficult for openings to be explored and critical thinking to take place” (p. 56). Greene focuses heavily on the tremendous impact of imagination and how without
the capability of seeing what could be, we are held in static despair, waiting forever. She calls attention to
the necessity for “wide-awakeness, of awareness of
what it is to be in the world” and that those who are
“willing to risk transformations” are the individuals
who see that social vision with compassion and
capability (pp. 30, 35). Good, artistic teaching is that
which reflects this compassion and provides
opportunity for students to not only be awakened to
their world, but to act within their capabilities to better
that world. Elliot Eisner (1991) describes artistic
teaching as aesthetic in nature, both for students and
teacher alike. He describes it as being attuned to the
teaching/learning context, staying flexible and open to
unforeseen potential. What Eisner describes is one of
the things that led me to this life working with a room
full of individuals. It was also the innate sense of
creativity that comes with teaching at its best—the
excitement for swirling ideas and anxious interruptions
in what may seem to be a ‘normal’ day. I think this is
what we search for as educators—that chance to exist
with our students in an all-encompassing, opening
experience that allows for a diversity of response.
Have we seen this before—enough to know when
we’ve recognized authentic learning and opening
spaces? Are we encouraged to find this? I move to a
consideration of what it is like to experience this
potential in learning and defining ourselves and then
lose that opportunity.

**Effective Loss**

Creating space for imagination and allowing time
for savoring text seem to fly in the face of what society
would call *effective* ways to operate. Margaret
Hunsberger (1992) makes the connection of money
words to what we use to describe time like, borrow
time, buy some time, wasting time, or spending time.
This drives thoughts of our existence down to elements
and segments of use. We learn to quantify our
experience, which thusly leads to categorizations and
definitive decisions about whether or not we have
lived correctly or efficiently. This leads me to
associate words like *effective* and *efficient* with a sense
of personal loss. Trevor Pateman (1997) describes a
certain response to obsessiveness that “never allows
the listener or spectator a breather” (p. 6). How did we
as a society and more specifically, an academic
community (all school institutions included here) get
to a point where efficiency was prized above novel
originality and the potential for creativity? We may
save face by giving lip service to creative endeavors,
but should they interfere with more ‘practical
necessities’, they no longer have a place in the daily
lives of students.

I cringe to think that loss and frustration is how I
first think of my teaching experience. I smirk as I sit
here wanting to start with, “As a recovering teacher…”
because it is quite pessimistic. There is a reason I
continue to pursue a journey in education and it is that
knowledge that allows me to reconnect with my past in
education. Contrary to the previous statement, my
‘past’ in education isn’t a tragedy, but one that
encouraged a need to think differently than what I was
experiencing. In Hunsberger’s (1992) words, “Just as
the horizon is needed in order to locate ourselves in
space…so the past and future are a necessary part of
our sense of the present and of our sense-making”
(p. 65). The complexity in being a teacher is
increasingly evident.

In my first year of teaching I found myself in a
small town of 25,000 in the Midwest. I was living
alone for the first time in my life and was terrified of
having my own classroom and so many students to be
responsible for. I made daily phone calls to my mom,
looking for hints and clues as to how to make it
through each day. My mother, a fourth generation
educator, helped guide me through learning to be a
teacher and communicating within the world of
education. My first year went by as many do—with
many days on the verge of quitting, many nights in
front of the computer, many afternoons navigating the
school’s ins and outs. It was a struggle. I remember
being evaluated by one of the five or six
administrators. She sat at the front of the room and
typed on her computer, rarely looking up. Both reports
I got indicated I was doing marvelously. On the one
hand, I was elated that I was getting that feedback in
my first year. On the other hand, I was confused how
she came up with such a glowing report from staring at
her computer screen for 20 minutes, twice in a year.
During the spring of that year, my mom visited and
came to watch me teach. I told her to do whatever she
does when she evaluates her own teachers, and to be
completely honest. Our follow-up discussion after that
day was more valuable to me than any official
evaluation I’ve ever had. She actually spent time
watching my actions, the students’ actions, and our responses to one another. She narrated back to me how I spoke and what words caused students to sit up and take note. The detail, the care, and the time she spent watching me be a teacher helped me begin to see myself as authentic.

My second and third years of teaching were spent at a charter school in the southwestern part of the U.S. I look back on those two years as a confusing array of experiences that led me in circles. While I will always treasure the relationships I gained there in contrast to the isolation I felt at my first position, I spent too many days re-evaluating whether or not I wanted to remain a teacher. I made more than one list of pros and cons in staying yet another year. The cons far outweighed the pros and I was astonished at what was pouring out of me as I kept listing item after item at the end of my second year. I began to look for ways out of that situation.

I was experiencing loss and I didn’t have the language or the space to explore what that meant for my identity. In being a student again, I believed I might have the chance to pause and reclaim what I found captivating about teaching in the beginning. I thought I might begin to heal from the wounds I was experiencing as my identities as teacher and as artist became more and more distant. I needed to linger within the why and how of teaching and the arts again. Wanda May (1991) describes lingering as an opportunity to dwell within the significance of our encounters, allowing ideas and reflections to emerge. I would find refuge in the space she leaves for sensory experiences informing more ‘intellectual’ considerations. Through narrative, she’s found understanding of her own experience. I find myself remembering my own moments of lingering and times when I was steered away from lingering. May’s discussion gives language to a deeper understanding “that questions were more important and provocative than answers” (p. 149). Coming from a place of loss in my first years of teaching, this made me question what kinds of expectations we have for practicing teachers. What kind of lingering are we expecting them to encounter? What spaces are current trends in schooling leaving for their own experiences to take shape and reform through lingering? What does my own experience have to offer those finding it difficult to linger?

Choosing To Linger

My personal history is as much a part of my teaching story as my three formal years in public K-12 teaching. For it is in those early moments and stories that repeat themselves in various forms that begin to tell us who we are. My history is storied out as I discuss being a young student, an artist, and a teacher, and how those roles came into conflict. After exploring my own story, I linger on some questions in trying to understand what’s missing.

As A Young Student

I wanted to be an artist more than anything in the world. I was the three-year-old who won a coloring contest that my parents now call ‘the beginning.’ I was the third grader who everyone wanted in their group when drawing was involved. I was the lucky teenager who was told by her parents to take as many art and music classes that I wanted. I knew I had something – people kept telling me so.

I was a docile student in that most things came easy for me and I fell in line with what teachers and the school expected of me. I was taught early on to be a polite, cognitive person who considers others’ feelings before my own. This continues to carry through my adult life but seems to hold greater importance as I begin this narrative. Grades held power for me as they did for most students and I, to this day, struggle with being able to ignore their forceful nature and hypnotic control. We are taught very early on that high grades take us places and allow us to enter and exit segments of life with ease, respect, and prosperity. But when the realization begins to appear that it is perhaps other spirits that guide who we truly are, it can be disorienting to rediscover our purpose and our self-understanding. It is not that I never considered the fallacy of the inevitable grade. In fact, I expressed much disinterest and disapproval for grading as I made my way through art, music and literary classes, as I saw no absolutes presented for me. The very first time I encountered a feeling of disapproval for this system was in the seventh grade. I had completed a drawing of a horse in response to a book we were reading in class. Our response to the reading could be ‘individual’ and creative license was granted. When I got my drawing back from the teacher, I was completely dismayed to see a ‘B’ on the drawing. Not only was I appalled that she had written

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directly on my artwork, but I was positive when I turned it in earlier that week that she would be so impressed with my creative idea, I might get special mention in class. I couldn’t fathom what could have possessed her to grade a piece of artwork. How do you evaluate a work good or bad when presumably no one else in the class had thought to respond the way I did? Her response to my meek questioning of her grading was, “in comparison to others’ works…” Others’ works? What did they have to do with my ideas? Why should I be evaluated solely on comparison to what someone else came up with? My first cognizant encounter with grading subjectivity proved a bit confusing but impassioning all the same.

What It Means To Be An Artist

The idea of being an artist continued to merge and emerge with my developing identity. I knew I could see things a little more clearly, or I could express with my art-making, things that others had trouble with. I remember feeling lucky and excited when presented with a creative task while others around me balked and fretted and made excuses. I knew there was something to my innate willingness to create however, I got so much pleasure from creating and the act of making that I couldn’t figure out why others couldn’t feel that as well. Who cares what the ending looked like – it just felt right. I experienced something when I was creating that was engrained so deep within me that it went beyond what I was making. The gut instinct I had, the need I felt, and the satisfaction that poured over me as I moved my hand across the page or smoothed the clay into place completely overtook me. This feeling I had couldn’t be unique- it seemed so…human. It not only encompassed my mind but my senses and my presence as well. ‘Everyone needs this!’ I thought. It was a cyclical experience that you entered into, became fluid within, and then when the time was right, stepped away from and considered from a distance.

However, I kept hearing a constant rebuttal to this freeing process. That was that the ‘true’ artists of the world have been relegated to assume an odd identity; a marginal position that is ‘respected’ but put in a separate place. We (community/society) do not go there without permission. We claim ignorance and a lack of understanding. Bravery escapes us as we allow others to make meaning for us. And then the cycle begins again. Because we do not claim to make valid meaning of the world around us, we cannot connect to it and therefore we allow ourselves to distance, disconnect and severe ourselves from any process that might require us to enter into that tenuous place of meaning.

Figuring myself to be part of that separate place for “artists,” I wholeheartedly entered into a Bachelor of Fine Arts program right out of high school. I met others with this innate willingness to create but with far better precision and thoughtfulness than I had. It was a time of humility as I rediscovered what art making meant for me. It was beautiful being among people who created new ideas and used their own lives as inspiration day in and day out. We were immersed in the creative process, working until two or three in the morning on a regular basis. Professors and students acted as guides for one another and class time became studio space to create, rethink, envision, experiment, fail, and perhaps, succeed. As my four-and-a-half years went on, including a mind-altering semester in Italy, I began to restructure my fervent belief that art was for everyone. I began to consider that rather than ‘art’ for all, it is the creative process that we all need to live. It is that process that we dangerously lay aside and bring out only for special occasions. But it is this process that awakens, enlivens, and gives meaning to our humanity.

What It Means To Become A Teacher

My glowing description of earning a Bachelor of Fine Arts doesn’t account for the transition I made into arts education from fine arts. After revealing to myself that this was the path I needed to take, I began sharing this idea with professors in the art college. With just the slightest bit of hesitation, I was told that this path into teacher-hood was laden with managing nightmares, ungrateful administrators, uncaring students and experiences devoid of any ‘real art.’ It was made clear to me that this was a cop-out on my part that saved me from creating any of my own art. Granted, there were a few enthusiastic professors who found interest and hope in my decision, but unfortunately I encountered them after I became a teacher and the negativity of the first group seemed to outweigh the few hopeful. From that point on, I no longer had a welcome place in the fine arts program. I was a lost cause. This was when I learned of the
fervent separation that can exist between the concepts of artistry and teaching.

With the encouragement of my parents, I decided to obtain a Masters in Secondary Teaching degree while getting certified to teach. I hung on every word methods instructors said when they eluded to ‘tricks’ or ‘solutions’ for potential issues in the classroom. An added ‘complication’ to being an art teacher I found involved the need to be a strong advocate. Art in public schools was not a given and I would need to justify, explain, be aware of, and account for myself and my program. A scary proposition, yes, but it necessitated my early search for purpose within the arts and an ability to express (as eloquently as possible) why they were so important. A scary proposition, yes, but it necessitated my early search for purpose within the arts and an ability to express (as eloquently as possible) why they were so important. A downfall to this early preparation was perhaps the constant feeling of being on the defensive. In my teaching experience I did actually find that many people believed the arts were important. The problem was, they couldn’t really explain why other than that they provided ‘a break’ from the truly ‘rigorous disciplines.’ There are so many things wrong with that thought and yet I took in all the support I could get.

I began to think that if I prepared enough for teaching, thought of every potential situation and faced it head-on, I could step in and do my job right the first time. I wouldn’t fall into being cynical and I would love each and every one of my students – and they would love me! I made worksheets, sign-out lists, tardy slips, and class posters – and although my Masters project was all about the importance of individuality in the art classroom, my brain had already switched to ‘survival mode’ and I was full-throttle management queen. My earlier inspired thoughts about the necessity of formative assessment, portfolios, journals and my experience in the arts-focus school while student teaching began to fade into the background. I saw my role quite differently than the one I’d written about just months before. One can theorize and speculate about what they will be in front of a classroom but then, what happens when we actually are in front of that classroom? And how long do you teach before your identity is truly yours? I can now step back and reflect on how I changed in the classroom.

Conflicting Roles

As I saw my identity change from artist to student to teacher, I was forgetting to look back. I continued to take in new knowledge about being a teacher, but discredited what I already had to offer as an artist. Some parts of our identities are undeniable, true, but if we don’t consciously develop those parts, do they continue to thrive and play a part in who we are? In the three years I spent teaching public high school I saw my identity change. I saw my students reacting and responding to a person that I was unfamiliar with. I knew there was a piece they were missing – a piece of a complex puzzle that allows us to grow and change and yet still be confident in our experience. This change I saw in myself wasn’t necessarily negative or counterproductive, however, gone unexamined it became a stumbling block. I desperately wanted my students to search for their own identities and be comfortable within their uniqueness, yet I was denying myself that critical process. I needed a conscious connection to my developing identity and I wondered if it might be related to this idea of being a teacher and an artist simultaneously.

Being an artist and a teacher simultaneously seemed to come into conflict, however, the longer I taught. How could one remain truly dedicated to one or the other if both are to be pursued? John Dewey’s (1934) notion of teacher responsibility weighs heavily here when he describes a life fraught with complexity and multiplicity. I saw myself more narrowly, through notions of control and obedience. I remember times when taking attendance, marking calendars, using passes successfully, catching all the announcements and getting all questions answered in a timely fashion felt like an extremely productive class period. I reveled in my own organization. What I kept forgetting to do was consider the displacement I knew I was feeling and relate that to what my students had to be feeling as a result of my overly organized classroom. I thought routines would lead me to a better place – a place where I could become the teacher I set out to be – but not until then. Without organization, routines and expected procedures, wouldn’t students think I was disorganized and incompetent? I had stopped lingering (had I started?) and was relying on what administrators and other teachers praised me for – a well organized, visually pleasing, and seemingly seamless class environment.
Without a consideration of one’s place in the learning experience, how do we authentically contribute, understand, and make meaning of that experience? How else do we consider who we are in experience than by lingering?

What Was Missing

I reclaimed bits of my artist self from time to time and took pleasure in searching for different ways to reach different students. Deep down I still held true to what I believed education was about, but struggled daily in my classroom to see those come to life and in meetings with other teachers and administrators to find camaraderie in those beliefs. I believe now that if conversations had taken place on a more regular basis concerning some of my and others’ beliefs about education and were truly valued, I might be telling a different story. What would happen if we (community, policymakers, etc.) were adamant that teachers are the professionals they are only sometimes professed to be? In avoiding an endless discussion of how underappreciated teachers are, we can shift to considering why we still must ask this question. In the light (or darkness) of the standards movement, No Child Left Behind, and scripted curriculum, we must consider how it has shifted the place of teachers and their role in the learning/teaching experience. What has this shift done to teacher agency, creativity, and identity? Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi’s (1996) discussion reinforces that this complex and creative dilemma will not be answered easily. The complexity of the creative process is rewarding because it is this way. It is unpredictable and therefore flies in the face of the conventional, the knowable, and the foreseeable. Have we lost the policymakers here? The community? Perhaps we back up a bit further and first ask why so many are unfamiliar with the creative process. When did we stop lingering? Why don’t we acknowledge its presence and talk about it with value everyday? Is it more than not having a language for it? Or is it that there’s just not time to linger within? Shouldn’t we (and they) make time?

A similar concept is explored by Gert. Biesta (2007) in his Why ‘What Works’ Won’t Work article considering evidence-based practice and democracy in education. I say ‘obvious’ because it seems only logical that policy makers, administrators and classroom educators would constantly seek out what works for their current students and teachers. Yet, current educational policies and understandings that are held in politically high esteem reflect ignorance to change and adaptation. Biesta brings up a concern of missing democratic control in educational practice and research. He describes the danger in taking away opportunity for educator judgment and the severe limiting of a chance to purposefully interact specifically with an educator’s personal context. I believe this is where a feeling of trust and professionalism begins to breakdown for educators. Without the opportunity to consistently and creatively engage in the present situation, how can teachers develop an understanding of their own insights into teaching? How will their students feel valued and seen by their teacher? How can we truly respond to student and teacher identity without trusting the teacher and the students to make classroom and curricular decisions?

With this evidence-based, technocratic understanding of education, it is no longer left for the teacher and student to interpret their experience other than to mechanically evaluate it against an accepted standard. Much becomes required from those few teachers who are able see beyond the lines of required curriculum and mandated activities. They become the light in a dark search and unfortunately, the exception to the rule. This is not to reduce or belittle current practicing teachers, but to call forth an overwhelming need for all teachers to have the space to become the true educator that they are and to remember why they wanted to teach in the beginning. It’s a calling forth of passion and an encouragement of teacher agency. Biesta reminds us “This is why education is at heart a moral practice more than a technological enterprise”, directing us toward a need to understand the educational experience as relational (p. 10). Education is an experience of people – by people, for people, and ultimately, about people.

The democratic element fits into this continuing understanding of education as relational. Democracy is a concept derived from a social society that depends on constant interaction. Although we can’t explore democracy fully enough here, we can tie a basic understanding to the concept of relational education. How can we offer students a whole education, one that will foster future communication with their world, if
we do not place enough trust in and give space to those who lead that education?

Continuing Correspondence

Being in correspondence means we enter into conversation as not only observers of interaction, but participants in inquiry. Once we understand that we have the freedom to engage, we begin to actively involve ourselves in the vital process of asking questions. We become aware of a means of play within thought. We linger to better understand our selves and others. We allow space for ourselves and others. Without this experience, I believe our senses become impoverished of creative potential and we experience effective loss. We lose the ability and willingness to reach out beyond our own reality and engage in someone else’s. This willingness to imagine possibilities is what makes a good educator. And as educators, we are many things. As humans we are many things, many of which can come into conflict. I involve the senses, because our minds do not teach our students, our whole being and identity teaches students. Our lived experiences teach students. Our wholeness teaches students. We cannot separate out the parts and pieces of us before we enter the classroom. Just as students see teachers in various lights according to appearance, demeanor, personality, teaching style etc., teachers see students this way – whether we’d like to or not. So wouldn’t it be advantageous in the light of this realization to take advantage of our whole beings and teach to and with the sensibilities we have as humans – to continue the correspondence of living with our selves and others? It is the only caring, noble, democratic, informed thing we can do for the future.

References