

A Conversation with Bruce Uhrmacher: Aesthetics, Beauty, Talent and the Arts

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JE & MS: *First of all, how did you first get started in working in the arts and aesthetics education?*

I have always had an interest in the arts. When I was growing up I wanted to be a cartoonist, but I learned early on that I didn't have the talent. I found myself advocating for the inclusion of the arts early within my career. I was teaching at a public alternative high school in Ogden, Utah (c. 1980) as one of three teachers. All three of us were responsible for teaching the entire curriculum to the school's thirty students. I was the one who made sure that we included the arts. Often, I'd arrange a guest speaker from Weber State to teach the students something related to the arts. One time, students learned how to make paper. Another time they learned about fiber arts.

While I was reasonably good at black and white photography, I never saw myself as an artist or an art educator. In fact, I was certified in social studies and I set out to be a social studies teacher.

When I chose to study at Stanford with Elliot Eisner, my interest was in exploring exciting ideas about curriculum and qualitative research. I was very drawn to educational criticism and connoisseurship. I didn't plan on utilizing his art education ideas, though I did sit in on one of his art education classes. Given that Eisner was one of the foremost educators in the arts, I thought I may as well take advantage of that.

Fast forward to my first years as an assistant professor at the University of Denver (DU), my dean asked if I would attend a meeting for all those interested in the arts in the Denver community. This was about 1992. It was an extraordinary meeting in that it was perhaps the first and last time that everyone in the cultural arts community—The Denver Art Museum, The Children's Museum, etc.—met in one room. At the end of the meeting, I was



approached by several individuals from the organization Young Audiences. They organized an Aesthetic Education Institute of Colorado (AEIC), held each summer for K-12 teachers.

While the Institute was being directed out of the University of Colorado/Denver at the time, they were hoping to make a switch to DU. I was at the right place at the right time for this kind of opportunity. And, of course, having studied with Elliot Eisner was a strong advantage for me. Interestingly, however, my work with AEIC was about integrating the arts, and as many readers of this interview know, Elliot was all about discipline-based art education.

JE: Can you briefly discuss your work with the Aesthetic Education Institute of Colorado and the importance of this institute?

Sure, but first, a few clarifications in terms of names and time periods. The Aesthetic Education Institute of Colorado (AEIC) began in the late 1980s and was initially hosted by the University of Colorado/Denver and Young Audiences. AEIC was loosely based on the ideas of the Lincoln Center of New York, but the Coloradoans who conceptualized and organized the Institute quickly made it their own. For example, AEIC has always utilized local artists in various art disciplines rather than focusing on one artist, as I believe the Lincoln Center used to do. In any case, the local chapter of Young Audiences eventually changed its name to Think360Arts. Also, AEIC would later become the Creativity Institute for Teachers. So, today, just to be clear, the Creativity Institute for Teachers is organized by Think360Arts and the Morgridge College of Education at the University of Denver.

Years ago, we held a two-week summer institute. We hired five local artists, generally one from dance, theatre, music, creative writing, and visual art. Our goal was to “awaken the artist within,” and to get participants in touch with the creative process. It was not about producing artists. No way we could do that in such a short time, but we could help participants use their imagination, and become actively engaged in the arts. Besides the behind the scenes organizing, my role at the Institute itself was to deliver the lectures on aesthetics. I inherited this task from a wonderful University of Colorado of Denver professor Georg Gadow, who had a brilliant understanding of aesthetics from a European point of view. I had sat in his lectures and I found them inspiring. But I knew early on that his abilities were not mine; I could not deliver such lectures. So, I built on what I knew, which were mostly focused on the ideas of John Dewey and Elliot Eisner.

Although my lectures were very rough those early years, I did have the angle of tying aesthetics to education in practical ways, so my audiences were patient with me. In time, I had my own ideas about ways to include the arts in schools, and thus, I was able to provide some originality to my lectures. As one quick example, I had this notion of how to utilize what the participants were learning at the Institute in schools through stages. My 2007 essay with Christy McConnell Moroye, entitled “Instituting the Arts,” covers some of these elements.

My ideas were really pushed along after Eisner visited Denver in 2006. *Think360Arts* held a meeting in which Elliot learned about what we were doing and asked pointed questions about our aims and goals. The Institute then attracted educators from all over: K-12, all subject areas and it included, rural and urban settings I did not want to create a “model” of arts education. Models seem to come and go; they also seem to fit some contexts and not others. I was trying to appeal to a variety of participants and I thought the creation of a new model was not the best approach. But Elliot really pushed us to create a vision unique to our purpose. I took Elliot’s recommendation to heart and during my sabbatical, with two key student assistants, Kristen Bunn and Christy McConnell Moroye, and a few others as well, came up with this idea of CRISPA. One might note, however, that the acronym came later and in my first paper on what would be called CRISPA (see “Toward a Theory of Aesthetic Learning Experiences, 2009) I did not have that acronym. I used the term ‘perceptual teaching’ and I still use that term as a synonym for CRISPA.

In short, I reflected on what I had learned by watching artists work with teachers and then I cross-checked those ideas with Dewey's. For example, I noted that all the artists employ risk-taking. They ask participants to take risks in big and small ways. For some participants, just showing up at the dance workshop is a risk. For others it may be trying another art form. Thus, risk-taking was a theme. I then cross-checked this theme with John Dewey's ideas as found in *Art as Experience*. You will see that each of our themes is mentioned in Dewey's book. I mentioned that at one time the Institute lasted two weeks. Today we do the Institute in about five days. But it still encompasses the major organizational style. We have artists do a focus piece to demonstrate their artworks. The artists all conduct workshops to help participants engage in their arts and in the creative process. The Institute also has what we call bridgebuilders, who assist the participants in making connections between what they are learning in the artists' workshops and their own teaching. The lectures I provide today are discussions of CRISPA, expanded below.

JE & MS: *Your Aesthetic Themes of Education (sensory experience, imagination, perceptivity, active engagement, risk-taking and connections), which you explore in an article of the same title, are insightful. Can you discuss one or several of the themes, which you view as distinctive themes within the realm of previous Aesthetics Education (Greene, Smith, Eisner, Huebner, etc.) work?*

As I mentioned, these themes were drawn from empirical investigation as checked by philosophical analysis. I watched artists work with educators and from those interactions derived key ideas about artistic educational practices. I then examined John Dewey's *Art as Experience* to see if those ideas were discussed. Now, having read Dewey before, I had a good idea that the ideas of CRISPA would prevail, but I was surprised that each term was stated specifically. Not in the order, or in the organization of my ideas, but they were there. I don't think Greene, Smith, Eisner or Huebner would argue with my themes, per se. They have each covered similar concepts. I suppose one that stands out might be risk-taking. Again, each of the other authors would likely agree with risk-taking, and in their own ways, they have discussed it, but none, in my estimation, hit the theme head-on. In my 2011 essay "Risk-Taking and the Dance of the Blessed Spirits," for instance, in that essay, I define aesthetic risk-taking as: "the willingness to participate in actions that deepen the learning experience by acting outside one's comfort zone, and, therefore, opening oneself up to new and novel ideas, emotions, and ways of being."

I believe this is an important aspect to the educational process. I worked with a theatre artist, Birgitta DePree who emphasized that schools should be places where students take risks and accept that they don't have to be perfect to be learning.

JE & MS: *You have edited a book on Elliot Eisner and had the privilege of studying with him at Stanford University. What are some of the ways in which Eisner's work has left a mark on your approach to Aesthetics Education?*

There were so many ways. To begin, he introduced me to major writers on aesthetics including but not limited to John Dewey, Leo Tolstoy, Susanne Langer, Harry Broudy, and Maxine Greene. At the time I was studying with him, he was engaged in exploring Nelson Goodman's ideas. Eisner taught a class called Aesthetic Foundations of Education, and I appropriated that title, with some of the ideas he taught me, in a class I teach at the University of Denver. Now my class is very different in some striking ways (e.g., I focus on the implementation of aesthetic ideas which he did not), but the inspiration was from Elliot. In addition, as I indicated above, Elliot pushed me to think through what we were trying to accomplish with our workshops at our Aesthetic Education Institute of Colorado. CRISPA came out of my deep dive into ideas and Elliot was the one who pushed me along that trajectory. Later, he also looked over my initial paper on CRISPA and gave me a nod of approval. (Nel Noddings, by the way, a Deweyan scholar whom many of your readers would know, also gave me the thumbs-up on the CRISPA paper.) Another major idea I learned from Elliot was to

be pragmatic about aesthetic theory. Elliot did not have a need to hold onto one theory of aesthetics. He was comfortable utilizing several different theories depending on his interests and purposes at the time. This was and continues to be a powerful idea. Joseph Schwab noted that every theory is partial and incomplete, and so it is wise to be eclectic in utilizing theory. While I don't know this as a fact, I suspect that Elliot took this advice from Schwab to heart. And I do as well.

JE & MS: *Since this is an Aesthetics Education focused interview, I would be remiss if I did not give you a chance to openly reflect on the Aesthetic Realm. That said, Harry Broudy (1972) in his Enlightened Cherishing remarked that 'The quality of life is measured by the repertory of feeling which pervades it. Life is rich if the repertory of feelings is large and the discrimination among them fine. Life is coarse, brutish, and violent when the repertory is meager and undifferentiated. Aesthetic education's role in enlightened cherishing is to enlarge and refine the repertory of feeling.' What are your thoughts on this statement?*

I love it. At the end of each of our Institutes, I provide a concluding narrative. I'm going to provide a rough sketch of it below and you will see that it reflects and expands on Broudy's remark:



This has been a terrific Institute. If you were like me, you've worked hard all day yet had fun at the same time. AEIC is both demanding and invigorating simultaneously. It is however, hard to explain this Institute to friends or even your loved ones. Perhaps you came home, tired, and talked about how hard you worked, how little time you had to relax, and just how rigorous the Institute was. But what did your friends or spouses see you come home with? Not stacks of books from the library. And you weren't laboring over writing some kind of major thesis in the evening.

No, you would come home with home-made journals. Maybe your loved ones noticed you making odd bodily gestures from the refrigerator to the stove--3 or 4 times and then you announced, 'let's take it outside.' Or maybe you tried to get your family to play a call and response with kitchen pots and pans in rhythmic beats.

The activities we engaged in were fun, but the implications are serious. We are talking about creating classrooms where imagination can be fostered and where creativity is treasured. Without imagination and creativity, democracy would wither, industry would come to a halt, and life would become bland. When we talk about the importance of art we are talking about the quality of present experience. And when we talk about the quality of present experience we are talking about nothing less than the saving of some children's lives. We are truly talking about art for life's sake. Our methods are fun, but our work is serious indeed.

Educator and philosopher, Maxine Greene once said, 'It may be the recovery of imagination that lessens the social paralysis we see around us and restores the sense that something can be done in the name of what is decent and humane' (1995). If so, then I believe it will be the arts that move us to recover our imagination and to become more human.

While it may seem daunting to most of us to even try and rework the gargantuan institution of schooling, what I learn from this Institute over and over again is what it is that schooling and life is all about. In short, to quote Csikszentmihalyi and Robinson (1990):

Aesthetic experiences are evanescent whose value is discounted when we think about issues such as power and wealth. But another way to look at value involves recognizing that the essential point of existence is not how much people own or how much power they have but the quality of their experiences. The value of a person's life--whether it was filled with interesting and meaningful events or whether it was a sequence of featureless and pointless ones--is determined more by the sum of experiences over time than by the sum of objective possessions or achievements.

JE & MS: *What have we neglected to ask you?*

If it is appropriate, I'd like to end with a few recommendations that may interest your readers. First, our Creativity Institute for Teachers is open for anyone anywhere. One can find more information about it at: <https://think360arts.org/>

The Institute is generally held in mid-June.

Second, we have a website with information about CRISPA. You can check it out at: <http://www.crispateaching.org/>

Third, there are a number of excellent blogs regarding progressive orientations to education that one could follow.

I'd like to recommend two. My colleague at the University of Denver, Paul Michalec has one that can be found here: <https://morgridge.du.edu/blog/blog-dr-paul-michalec/>

And one of my former students and now a colleague, Bradley Conrad has one entitled Tales from the Classroom: <https://www.talesfromtheclassroom.com/Finally>, I'd like to say that I very much appreciate this opportunity to be interviewed and to provide some remarks about my life and ideas about aesthetic education. I am thrilled to have been a recipient of the 2018 Upton Sinclair award. For those who wish to follow my upcoming work, be on the lookout for my tying together the arts, aesthetics, and environmental concerns, under the heading of aesthetic eco-mindedness (see McConnell Moroye & Uhrmacher (2018) for one exploration) and eco-educational criticism and connoisseurship.

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