

# COME THROUGH THE DOOR WITH ME: PONDERING INVENTIVE PRACTICE

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**ABSTRACT.** The purpose of this paper is to engage readers in thinking about the art of teaching and how to support inventive practice. Readers are invited into a classroom and immersed in a day of learning with 11- and 12-year-olds.

## PASSONS LE SEUIL ENSEMBLE : RÉFLEXION SUR LA PRATIQUE INVENTIVE

**RÉSUMÉ.** L'objectif de cet article est d'inciter les lecteur(e)s à réfléchir sur l'art d'enseigner et à la manière de soutenir la pratique inventive. Les lecteur(e)s sont invités dans une salle de classe et immergés dans une journée d'apprentissage avec des enfants de 11 et 12 ans.

Over a century ago, in his talk to teachers, William James (1899), who was one of the first in a long line of psychologists to make suggestions for effective teaching practice, nonetheless admonished teachers not to expect too much from psychology:

You make a great, a very great mistake, if you think that psychology, being the science of the mind's laws, is something from which you can deduce definite programmes and schemes and methods of instruction for immediate schoolroom use. Psychology is a science, and teaching is an art; and sciences never generate arts directly out of themselves. An intermediary inventive mind must make the application, by using its originality. (p. 7)

We have not heeded his warning. Our school budgets strain to include psychologists, counsellors, speech pathologists, occupational therapists, specialists in literacy, numeracy, English language learning, special needs, technology integration, innovation, all schooled in the latest scientific research for deducing definite programs, schemes and methods for classroom use. A steady stream (at times a firehose) of new scientific theories and technologies fuel ever-new programs based on the latest advances. Our cupboards are jammed full of the assorted debris of the abandoned last best thing: math

texts (a new set for every new approach), assorted manipulative blocks (missing pieces and instructions), colour-coded booklets to support a program we no longer have, games, kits, rows and rows of binders. Yet despite ongoing scientific advances, instruction and support for practice informed by them, teaching hasn't become easier, and children aren't learning with any greater proficiency. We blame teachers, administrators, students, a lack of resources, families, and government policies. No one blames the answers themselves. The facts are facts, after all. We accept, without question, the next theories, new programs, revised systems, and cutting-edge technologies. We keep trying and discarding answer after answer and wondering why what is supposed to work still isn't working. Many agree with Dylan Wiliam (2018) that despite "a great deal of well-organized evidence that shows that there are things that every school district could be doing ... they are not being implemented consistently in our schools" (p. 118). We nod along with the belief that if only teachers would just consistently apply best practice derived from solid empirical evidence of what works, then all children would become the "powerful learners, skilled workers and engaged citizens we want them to be" (Groff, 2012, p. 2).

But what if William James is right? What if we need inventive application instead of consistent application? The trouble is, although it is very clear what we must do to generate scientific theories, to develop evidence-based programs and to implement them, we do not know what to do in art — this inventive work. Russian literary theorist Viktor Shklovsky has an answer:

What do we do in art? We resuscitate life. Man is so busy with life that he forgets to live it. He always says: tomorrow, tomorrow. And that's the real death. So what is art's great achievement? Life. A life that can be seen, felt, lived tangibly. (as cited in Vitale, 2013, p. 53)

Although this might seem too vague to go on with, one thing becomes clear: the art of teaching isn't in the exhaustive and exhausting search for best practices, or in defining future success, or, from targets thus derived, in tracking progress and improvement. Indeed, it is more likely to pause on Sharon Todd's (2011) beautiful question: "What transformational role can education play in order to make a difference in the world if it already presumes to know what it wants that world to be and what it wants students to become?" (p. 509). The art of teaching isn't even about applying "creativity" defined and packaged with (more) best practices and strategies. Shklovsky (1917/2016) contends, "Art is the means to live through the making of a thing; what has been made does not matter in art" (p. 162). What do we make in schools? We make learning (in all its multitudinous variations), which isn't knowledge, but rather knowledge in the making (Ellsworth, 2005). To find "not things made but things in the making" (p. 60), William James (1909) argues, we must seek a "living understanding of the movement of reality, not follow science in vainly patching together fragments of its dead results" (p. 60).

If we gather a living understanding of teaching, what might we learn about its art? Because, if William James is right, our efforts in working toward evidence-based education have been mistaken. And if so, what might we do instead, those of us engaged in education, to support teachers and their students?

What if we experiment, you and I, in trying to capture this livingness now keeping this question in mind?

Come. Walk through the door with me.

As you can see, it's an ordinary classroom. You probably spent many years in one very much like it. A bank of windows across the room from you looks out onto the soccer field and an outdoor basketball court. The desks and hard plastic chairs are arranged in pairs, triads or quads facing toward the front of the room where the blackboard you remember has been replaced with a white board and screen. The children haven't arrived yet, so the desks are neat, the floor clean, but the sheen from the summer waxing is already fading; there is a container filled with sharp pencils at the front, baskets of books on the back shelf, a cart full of laptops on hand; the children's work is displayed everywhere. Look around.

The bell is ringing, now. The children fill up the room quickly: chairs scrape, voices lift, someone is pushing already, another complains. One comes in breathlessly and says she needs to go down to breakfast. They begin to settle into their chairs. Meet them.

This year's group is equally divided between boys and girls. Our school is situated in one of those neighbourhoods tucked into downtown corners and ignored as much as possible. Except for a handful of the children, they have lived unsettled, often very transient lives, moving ahead of the rent due or shuffling back and forth between parents, grandparents, aunts and uncles or in and out of foster homes as families struggle with addictions, poverty, violence. A number of the children have designations: an alphabet soup of labels to try to describe and prescribe for their learning delays and behaviour challenges. I'm sure, though, that you can already see how beautiful they are, how much each child here matters, that the job is breathtakingly difficult and so important that your heart shudders a little, and you think it might be easier to talk about strategies and programs and policies. Stay.

It's Monday, which is always a more difficult day. Who knows what the weekend brought. Yes, we'll have challenges today. You can probably tell, too. Ronald has his hoodie pulled up over his nose and down over his brow. His eyes are slits, and he is muttering, "I hate this school." (I do several "talk-bys," to gently bring Ronald out of "stuck" and back into engagement.) Susan has her head on her desk, weeping already. (I pet her hair for a few minutes, whisper to her to tell us what she needs, and have Annie watch over her.)

Wyatt's face is already bright red, and his eyes are blazing. Something happened in the playground before school, I'm guessing. (I steer clear; you should, too. Intervention at this point will set him on a course that will mean he has to be removed from the classroom.) Dylan is already almost asleep. (I step beside him and ask him if he is well enough to stay in school today. He has recently returned from foster care to his family, and I worry, worry, worry.) Lewis is on form. Despite the heavy rain and cold wind this morning, he's wearing shorts and a T-shirt as usual and beginning his puppet-master role, calling to Matt who, despite his best intentions, can't resist turning his head to engage. (I gesture Matt forward. I give Lewis a look that says, "How much longer do you need?") I've asked for quiet so I can introduce you, but Lewis will take a few more minutes to show that he is the one in control. This sets Wyatt muttering under his breath, and his face gets redder. Now we know who got under his skin before school even started. It will be a dance today between allowing Lewis some rein so he feels freer, more in control and ready to learn, and reining him in so Wyatt doesn't explode. There are 21 more students and so much to say about each of them. How sorry I am that you won't get to know them. There isn't time. There never is.

Still, stay, just for a while longer.

Let us come back to Susan. Remember her? She is the weeping girl. Can you picture her? She has big brown eyes, dark hair to her chin, and she's tiny; she would blend in with a group of eight-year-olds even though she's almost 12. Here's why I think she's weeping today. Her mother is drinking again, and Susan is left to care for her three siblings, the youngest of whom is still in diapers. She's probably exhausted and hungry, even though she's had breakfast provided by the school. But the weekend is long and here, where she is safe again, where she is cared for, she is a little girl again; she puts down her burden and cries. I taught her mother when I first started teaching at the high school up the hill. I remember her. She was such a quiet, keen-eyed girl in my English 11 class. And then she got pregnant. I might have taught Susan's father, too. I don't remember him. He already had a child at the time. Cassandra. I taught her two years ago, Susan's half-sister. Last year Cassandra went to high school. By October she had been hospitalized with a drug overdose. See Susan again. This beautiful girl.

To bring the class — already bubbling and seething with I know not what — to calm, I use direct instruction to support them (in a set of recursive lessons) to respond to complex text. I keep the steps small, the class quiet; I provide prompts, scaffolds, mini-lessons, small chunks of silent focus interspersed with free play. (On another day, I would create an open-ended, immersive experience, but not today. You are here. You understand why.) By lunch, the students have each completed a paragraph, self-assessed, revised after reviewing models and re-assessed. Clarence stares at his paragraph in considerable

astonishment. I point out that it is certainly the longest piece of writing he has done this year. (He is new to our school and so far, he has only written a sentence or two with painful slowness.) He looks up at me and then down at his paragraph again, "This is the most I have written in my whole LIFE!" His joy spills into the classroom and the rest of the children look at their work newly. Can you feel it?

The afternoon looms ahead of us. The rain has stopped, the wind died down and the sun now shines and beckons in a way that only November sun can do. I give the students an option to work to create awareness of global change in any way they want, alone or in pairs or groups. We brainstorm possibilities. We set some behaviour boundaries. Susan and Annie want to make a movie. They dash outside with an iPad, their plan sketchy at best. Blake is excited. He is determined to become an Internet sensation and thinks this might be his chance. A few boys attach to his plan, and I let them go. Blake was recently suspended in a very public display of anger and violence that has left him feeling vulnerable as he tries to restart relationships. I look out the window to see the boys cavorting in the sun, laughing and tumbling. Dylan is with them, playing, free for now of his many cares. Several children are cutting and pasting, gluing and creating. Matt has a big piece of paper in the hall, and they are asking him to help draw. I am so grateful he has this pocket of time to feel competent, capable... powerful even. Clarence and Tommy are chatting and drawing. I don't nudge them. They are both exhausted, I think, from the writing today. Let them rest here in the puddle of sunlight, in the murmur of voices and the muted giggles from the children in the hall. We'll have very little to show for our afternoon, I know. Except for Joey, who calls me over every few minutes to share another astonishing global warming fact, they will have learned very little. Or at least nothing I can measure. Nothing easily explained. Susan and Annie come in, laughing, glowing. The students tidy up and finish the day with a reflection.

The bell rings and the children disappear. Silence descends. The room isn't neat at all anymore. The children who were outside brought in clumps of grass on their shoes, those in the hall left bits of brightly coloured paper in slivers everywhere. The gleaming white boards are covered with the students' ideas, papers are haphazardly stacked, and the floors are littered with broken pencils, dropped markers, a forgotten jacket. I pick up Susan's reflection journal. "I hate everything and everyone," she writes in the morning. "I don't want to be here. Everything just looks hard." In the afternoon, she scribbles, "Sorry about this morning, Ms. B. I didn't think the day would turn out this way, but it was just FUN."

Here in this quiet mulling time, we tidy the room and get ready for tomorrow. This is as far as we can go today. The sun is setting. The janitor has swept and even run a damp mop over the floor. The boards are white again ready, waiting for new ideas, fresh insights.

Thank you for coming with me. What would happen, I wonder, if we stopped trying to find answers for classrooms and began, instead, to join teachers in this necessary daily invention, this making, these living spaces.

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