

IN PRAISE OF UNCERTAINTY, AMBIGUITY & WONDER

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ABSTRACT. This article takes its direction from notable educators such as John Dewey and Elliot Eisner who argue in favour of endorsing uncertainty and related responses within educational practice. The argument is a push-back against current emphasis on standardization, with its accompanying focus on single right answers that don't do justice to the complexities inherent in our daily lives. The dual nature of uncertainty is exemplified in the depiction of one person's interactions with two famous paintings. To provide the reader with a parallel encounter with uncertainty, the article includes a short video and concludes with an ekphrastic poem in response to the video, to illustrate the points being made.

CHANTER LES LOUANGES DE L'INCERTITUDE, DE L'AMBIGUÏTÉ ET DE L'ÉMERVEILLEMENT

RÉSUMÉ. Cet article s'inspire d'éducateurs de renom tels que John Dewey et Elliot Eisner, qui plaident en faveur de l'adoption de l'incertitude et des réponses associées au sein de la pratique éducative. L'argument repousse l'accent mis actuellement sur la standardisation – un accent qui dépend, par exemple, sur les bonnes réponses uniques qui ne rendent pas justice aux complexités inhérentes de la vie quotidienne. La double nature de l'incertitude est illustrée dans la représentation des interactions d'une seule personne avec deux peintures célèbres. Afin d'offrir au lecteur une rencontre parallèle avec l'incertitude, l'article comprend une courte vidéo et se termine par un poème ekphrastique en réponse, pour mettre en lumière l'argument suscité.

There are combined impetuses for this paper. One is John Dewey's concept of reflective experience, the first feature of which is: "perplexity, confusion, doubt, due to the fact that one is implicated in an incomplete situation whose full character is not yet determined." (In Gerald Gutek, 2001, p. 175). Another is from Matthew Bevis's commentary in the March 2017 issue of *Poetry* wherein he cites Nietzsche's recommendation to be "good at not

knowing” (p. 578). I take the phrase to mean that one should be willing to accept uncertainty, ambiguity (as opposed to taking pride in a state of ignorance). This stance applies to both teachers and students, so I include myself here (Campbell, 2007). I teach pre-service teachers, mostly undergraduate, in a large urban university. One course I teach addresses issues in aesthetics for generalist classroom teachers. Thus, a third impetus comes from my students’ predilections. Most are inclined towards a quest for certainty, for finding the right answer (Dayan & Jyu, 2003; Floden & Clark, 1988; Helsing, 2007). That is their school-based heritage after all. Those inclinations persist in much of their university-level course work. Through the introduction of arts-based exercises that involve the embracing of questions that have no single “right” answer, I resist such inclinations. In the following paragraphs I explain why I take the position that I do, argue for increased attention to the arts in education as an antidote to certainty, offer an example of video art that defies certainty, and close with my own ekphrastic exploration of the video.

PERSPECTIVES

Education has, in recent decades, become increasingly reliant on data-based knowledge that can be assessed through standardized testing. We are teaching what can most easily be tested and avoiding the uncertainties involved in addressing more difficult (and more interesting) questions. This paper is a push-back against such tendencies in its celebration of uncertainty, ambiguity, and attendant wonder.

Eliot Eisner was a strong supporter of such an educational orientation. In the 2002 John Dewey Lecture, delivered at Stanford University, Eisner stated: “Opening oneself to the uncertain is not a pervasive quality of our current educational environment. I believe that it needs to be among the values we cherish. Uncertainty needs to have its proper place in the kinds of schools we create” (Eisner, p. 7).

Despite Eisner’s recommendation, as I mentioned earlier, most of my students are inclined towards a quest for certainty. They are going to be teachers after all. Surely there must be correct do’s and don’ts. I resist such inclinations on students’ behalf for at least two reasons. First, teaching is a moral enterprise (Ayers, 2014; Brell, 2001; Coles, 1989; Noddings, 1992, 2003; Ward & McCotter, 2004). That is, like Nel Noddings (1992, 2003), I am persuaded that education is a relational exercise – an interaction between individuals, also keeping in mind that one is part of a social group. And those interactions do not lend themselves to absolutes. How a student will respond to a teacher’s overtures, and vice-versa, is uncertain. How one sees oneself as a teacher among teachers, and within the larger community, is also variable.

Second, standardized testing cannot begin to address subtle distinctions, nuances, preferences, ambiguities – the sometimes-conflicting experiences that layer up in our minds and contribute to awareness of the complexities of the human condition. The arts, however, do explore such complexities.

For example, David Swanger (1990) addressed the need for ambiguity in his discussion of Picasso's *Guernica*. While the work has been generally acknowledged as perhaps the greatest antiwar painting of the twentieth century, Swanger insisted that there could not be a singular answer to the meaning of the work. He asked, "What would that be, that war is wrong?" (p. 90). In other words, an attempt to reduce the meaning of the painting to a single answer is to reduce the work to a cliché. To do the painting justice, one must acknowledge the built-in ambiguity inherent in the myriad possible individual experiences of violence, not necessarily of war, that one brings to encounters with such a work. An exploration of ambiguity would disclose the variety and fragility of claims to knowledge in that particular case. It would draw attention to the necessity to celebrate uncertainty, perplexity, and acknowledgement of the importance of attention to the relation between embodied thinking (Johnson, 2007; Shusterman & Tomlin, 2008), rationality, and feeling in processes of meaning making (Langer, 1953; Nussbaum, 2006).

In parallel with Swanger's attention to ambiguity, New York's Frick Collection, former Head of Education, Rika Burnham (Burnham & Kai-Kee, 2011), has addressed the topic of uncertainty. In her chapter titled "Intense looks...", Burnham described her encounters with two of Bellini's paintings. One was the *San Giobbe Altarpiece*; the other, what has come to be known as the *Frick St. Francis*. In regard to the former, Burnham struggled mightily over what had to have been at least a two-hour session to make sense of the work. She was, as she termed it, "bewildered" (p. 68), also frustrated and irritated. Finally, the pieces fell into place for her, resulting in an "epiphanic clarity" (p. 70).

Burnham's many interactions with the *Frick St. Francis* were of a different order altogether. Where, in the former work, Burnham was satisfied that she had solved Bellini's puzzle, in the latter she acknowledged that "there is no consensus ...about what it means" (p. 70). Nonetheless, Burnham loves the *Frick St. Francis*. Indeed, she "revel[s] in the uncertainty" (p. 75). Burnham quoted Keats: "We must learn to accept 'being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason'" (p. 75).

Sometime before publication of their book, Burnham and Kai-Kee gave a joint presentation at the National Association for Education Through Art (NAEA), that was a prelude to the book. What Burnham admitted at the presentation, but only implied in her chapter, was that, having reached a conclusion about

the San Giobbe Altarpiece, henceforth she could not see it any other way. She had resolved the “incomplete situation” and arrived at the “full character” to which Dewey alluded; and that, as Burnham admitted, is, in some sense, a limitation. By comparison, the Frick St. Francis continues to tantalize. It still “merit[s] long and devoted study” (p. 75). In short, Burnham has advised us to “accept ambiguity and uncertainty as paths with their own pleasures” (p. 76).

Burnham’s anecdote provides us with two categories of uncertainty, one in which the puzzle is resolved, and the other in which ongoing uncertainty is celebrated. This is an important distinction because the former characterizes the orientation of most curricular activities. And while problem-resolution is generally personally satisfying and a responsible pedagogical goal, it is the latter category that I address here in pursuit of Burnham’s “paths with their own pleasures.”

I do so through a poetic exploration of a video artwork. I use a video because it is readily accessible to readers of this journal – no museum visit necessary – and, despite there not being a definitive answer, the exploration opens up possibilities for shared meaning making, for raising awareness of the complexities of our contemporary world that resist simplistic answers, but that can be addressed through more open-ended educational practices.

METHODOLOGY

I began my academic career as a painter and studio art instructor. In recent years, I have widened my arts orientation to include the writing of poetry in the form of experientially motivated responses to artworks, in other words, ekphrasis. The word ekphrasis comes from the early Greek and means “a speaking out” or “telling in full” (Heffernan, 1993, p. 3). That “telling in full” can be a faithful verbal description of the visual representation, but it can also be much more – an elaboration on the viewer’s experience, whatever directions that experience might take. The writing contributes to my research on aesthetic engagement and meaning making. Thus, my work is a particular branch of qualitative research, namely Arts-Based Research. I endorse Melisa Cahnmann-Taylor’s (2018) stipulation: “All arts-based researchers must ask: what and whom are the subjects of this work and to what extent does this project further some aspect of the public good?” (p. 248). In other words, while the description of personal experience requires the adoption of a radically subjective stance, there is an expectation, an obligation, for inter-subjective sharing. To that end, in some of my classes I show a 7-minute, 56 second video, “The carpet told me” by the Dutch artist, Jeroen Kooijmans (2007)¹ and invite participants to write down questions and comments. What do you see? What do you hear? What does it mean? (Click on the image below to watch the video)



When people reach an impasse, I provide some context. The artist was living in New York at the time of the Twin Towers collapse, which he witnessed from his apartment window. The event caused him, and continues to cause him, to meditate on the state our world. Kooijmans does not editorialize. That would limit discussion, disregard the uncertainty that characterizes the human condition.

The video is meant to evoke, to puzzle, perhaps to make us pause, to wonder. The image seems peaceful enough – slow moving clouds in a clear blue sky, gently rippling water, pastoral sounds – except that carpets don't normally float on water. That's a bit of a surprise, enough to make one uneasy, to wonder. When I showed the video to a class a few years ago, the uneasiness was exemplified by a young woman who asked, "Does it explode, or something?" This is my evolving, tentative response to the video.

The Carpet Told Me

The world is uncertain.

Aged four or thereabouts

at the seashore

I looked at the horizon

and wondered

where the water ended and

the sky began.

Now a carpet floats

even hints at
 flying
 as water reflects
 sky.
 Clouds scud silently by
 rippling water.
 Reeds tremble in the sky and
 Their shadows
 stripe the carpet.
 The world is upside down

Insistent wind, distant dogs barking,
 muffled cowbells
 A pastoral chorus
 An elegy
 for the figures
 not flying but falling
 from the flaming towers
 A prayer for the living and the crying.

SUMMARY

I return now to Cahnmann-Taylor's questions that I introduced earlier: "What and whom are the subjects of this work and to what extent does this project further some aspect of the public good?" My poem is certainly about me. As I grow older, I am less and less sure about things that I thought I knew when I was younger. And the poem is an invitation to share my uncertainties, to reject the current emphasis in education on the quest for right answers, for one-size-fits-all. So, to answer Taylor-Cahnmann's "whom" question, the answer is "us". In the current protectionist mentality that passes for thinking and colours political decision-making in increasing parts of the world, it is important to remind ourselves and our students of just how complex our world is. There are no simple answers, no quick fixes. We need to take time to reflect on that complexity and the wonder of it all. That is what the arts have to offer to education.

NOTES

1. <https://www.jeroenkooijmans.com/portfolio/the-carpet-told-me/>

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