Arts Education through the Workshop Method of Teaching: Constructing Shared Expressive Activities in the Classroom

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1. Research Purpose

This paper aims at presenting "the workshop method of teaching" as a constructivist model for arts education that could become a component of an altermative paradigm to the "teaching-learning" paradigm[i] that is dominant in the modern school system.

Based on the observation of a creative writing class at the university level, we probe into the meaning of the students' shared experience, and point out several features that were brought about by this teaching model, especially in terms of education in artistic expression. We refer to these as "indices" that demonstrate the success of this workshop method of teaching, and thus the success of art education in nurturing the expressive self engaged in a collaborative aesthetic activity situated in a learning community.

2. Perspectives

Learning in the arts, especially in a school setting, "tended to signify learning about, *knowing that.*" (Greene, 1996, p.63) As Maxine Greene states, "it was and is unlikely that people conducted on tours around museums had or have what Dewey called an aesthetic experience." (Ibid.) Passive viewing experiences in museums sometimes lead educators to think negatively about arts education as not useful, as merely "icing on the cake".

Matsushita (2000) points out how the characteristic features of the framework of the modern educational system are one-way communication of de-contextualized knowledge from teacher to students, pre-set objectives and standards based assessments, as well as efficiency-oriented teacher classwork. He says that distrust for all these methods makes us anxious to overcome the modern system that is characterized by these operational and subjective leaning experiences, and in turn orients us to a new framework. We should be alarmed, as Barone (2000) warns, about the "standardized school with a standardized vision of success tending to produce the standardized human beings (p.121)." Such an approach has been a stumbling block for education in the arts.

"Workshops" recently have been viewed as activity-oriented participatory learning in group form. Some workshops were frequently adopted only as a convenient device to make classwork more active and enjoyable. The teacher's role is also apt to be understood as shifted from the

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[i] As to the definition of paradigm, we are after the usage of Patton, M. Quinn (1978) .

"A paradigm is a world view, a general perspective, a way of breaking down the complexity of the real world. As such, paradigms are deeply embedded in the socialization of adherents and practitioners: paradigms tell them what is important, legitimate, and reasonable. Paradigms are also normative, telling the practitioner what to do without the necessity of long existential or epistemological consideration. But it is this aspect of paradigms that constitutes both their strength and their weakness in that the very reason for action is hidden in the unquestioned assumptions of the paradigm." (Patton, 1978, p. 203)

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provider of cultural knowledge to a mere supporter of learners who facilitates and enriches interactions amongst students. Here we see the false dichotomy between the learners' spontaneous, joyful activity and the teacher's professional leadership. Neglected here is depth of academic expertise and meaning-generation through artistic creation.

Contrary to this view, we define the "workshop method of teaching" as a constructivist educational method that enables students to reach to a high point of the academic achievement through acquiring a sense of fulfillment in students' own experience in the context of a shared experience in a collaborative learning-based community.

"Although the term "workshop" has been used rather loosely in the last decade, in creative writing it is a well-known and well established method of teaching. Creative writing, as an academic discipline, is focused on the creation of new texts of essays, poetry, short stories, plays, novels, creative nonfiction, and movie screenplays. Some classes are multi-genre; some are focused on one genre. The University of Iowa Creative Writing Program is credited as the origin of the workshop method of teaching. The workshop takes advantage of student diversity (some students may be internationals), rather than one-way teaching from a single dominant teacher, and thus is considered a successful way for prompting group cohesion and collaborative learning.

Workshops are a way to connect the aesthetic with the intellectual, as well as to connect the aesthetic with life. Quoting Dewey's *Art as Experience*, Barone (2000) stressed the aesthetics of life:

> It was John Dewey who rescued art from its imprisonment in an "aesthetic remove" distanced from the affairs of everyday life. Especially in *Art as Experience*, Dewey (1934/1958) articulated a vision of art as coterminous with being in the world, as "prefigured," he said, "within the very process of living." (Barone 2000, p. 121)

A successful education must have this sense of connection with life. As Barone says, we must see education as "a fundamentally aesthetic experience" in which each student "is challenged to see her life as an ongoing project with no final end in view" (Ibid., p. 131).

We know this is most likely to happen with a strong art education praxis. Our purposes are then to describe how it happens in the classroom settings, and what role the educator takes in classroom practice.

The general features of the creative writing workshop are:

1) All students are responsible for reading a chosen student writer's new creative work before the class meets.

2) The students listen and appreciate the work performed out loud in the workshop by the student/ author. The author may read the work quietly from a chair, or may get up and move around the room, performing even in the style of a slam poetry performance. Then students work along with the instructor to comment supportively and critically on the new work just heard. Students commenting in class can also respond to a typed copy of the work they have before them, on which they have made written comments before coming to class.

3) The author asks questions and then listens to the diverse suggestions of the other participants in order to improve her or his work. The author may respond by explayning the background of the work or what she or he was trying to accomplish ; or, she or he may ask for specific suggestions on how to improve sections or the overall structure of the writing.

3. Research Method

The action research was conducted with one author serving as the teacher and the other as a participant observer in a course in Creative Writing at Texas A&M University from March to May 2005, to examine the efficacy of expressive activities in the workshop setting, and to isolate the features that are characteristic of the "workshop method of teaching." The class consisted of eleven students from the Department of English. In a total of 12 classes of 75 minutes each, class discourses were recorded and the discussions were followed by the teacher and the observer.

To better understand the student relationships at the semester's end we asked each student to write a poem to each classmate. Because we didn't want a conventional questionnaire to distort reflections on class activities, we adopted an expressive activity instead as a device to learn about their understanding of their peers and emotional attachment to them. Each student was supposed to write an improvisational poem on a piece of paper.

We interwove several research methods. During the class planning stage, the two authors worked together and discussed every class. Based on that, we designed the last class activity, which was writing haiku to every peer student. While one author ran the workshops, the other conducted participant observation, utilizing "educational criticism and educational connoisseurship" by Eisner, for the purpose of describing and evaluating the classwork. We also examined a poem that was a surprise presentation during the final class which was on the subject of the class workshops themselves. We discussed several features of this idiosyncratic workshop practice and we will show the significance of aesthetic activities in this special kind of workshop, suggesting strategies for introducing the workshop for broader use in college or secondary school teaching.

One author conducted semi-structured interviews after the course was completed. Triangulation was sought between this educational criticism and the interview data.

4. Data and Results

1) Constructing the *topos* of the workshop by the teacher

Through the participant observation of one author, the following features were extracted as the characteristic way of creating the proper setting of a workshop.

i) Physically constructing the place

The teacher places chairs for eleven students in a circular form to enable them to face each other. Everyone is sitting unobstructedly because no desks were used even by the teacher. The teacher sits close to the blackboard, which was seldom used.

ii) Constructing the place through the teachers words

The teacher lets every student read her or his work out loud. In the discussion that followed, the teacher in many cases initiated the discussion, always with positive comments. The students follow in this way. When the teacher describes the work under discussion in relation to other texts, he lets students think of their own work in relation to past writers' works, in additon to helping to broaden their horizons.

iii) Demands from teacher to students

In the very first class, the teacher verbalizes his demands about the students' attitude in the workshop : that everyone's comments must be both positive and critical. There will be no discussion of students' personal religious or philosophical beliefs. The goal is to write the best poem or story possible from within each student's belief system. This was also reflected in the teacher's own attitude, so that a safe atmosphere was brought about.

iv) Teacher's commitment to reading students' works

The teacher requirs student commitment in reading every work and writing comments, with the teacher himself taking a substantial amount of time for both reading and writing comments on the students' works.

Though the works and texts the teacher brings in the workshop, are quite familiar to him, he reads and contemplates them shortly before he goes to the classroom.

v) Teacher-student relationship

The teacher, when he discuss some works, tends to relate episodes from his own experience, that of his close friends, and from well-known authors' lives and experiences. Therefore, the atmosphere is open to everybody's life experiences.

2) Constructing group cohesion through the class conversations

Here, we will discuss the quality of experience in the workshop, through an examination describing the collective experience in the classroom in the form of educational criticism. We observed many situations where one student's reading of a poem stimulated everyone's spontaneous conversation and encouraged each student to share his or her own childhood experiences, similarities, and individual personalities. A student we call here "Millie" presented a poem and conversation followed :

> *Millie performed her short poem titled "Aunt Mable fills eager pockets…" and everyone carefully listened. After she finished there was a long period of silence where each student absorbed the event of the poem. It seemed the ideas and emotions of the poem entered each reader generating personal thoughts and feelings. By being silent for a long moment each student was also paying respect to Millie for what she had accomplished. The students were reluctant to break the silence and move out of the experience that brought them together to the second part of the aesthetic activity--one of positive comment and critical questions in order to make Millie's poem better. They had many questions about the formal aspects of the poem, such as rhyme.*
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> *As Millie told her own experience, the others started to share their own childhood memories, such as climbing magnolia trees. They told her that the poem was so good they wanted to experience more. They wanted the poem to go on.*

Millie's reading out loud, and the silence that followed, allowed students individually and in common to "groove" on the poem. This aesthetic quality of silence in several workshop situations was observed. Silence, we concluded, was just as significant as the periods of discourse. Silence also set the stage for moments of special cohesiveness where words were no longer needed.

5. Theorizing the "workshop method of teaching" based on the case of creative writing classwork

Based on participant observation, we can identify the two major principles of the workshop method of teaching and the teacher's means to incorporate them into the classroom.

1) The diversity of students in the class must be the major resource for learning.

2) Instead of individuals (including the teacher) in the class, the community of the workshop will be the basis for discussion of students' artworks based on each member's comments. The same will be true for the evaluation of each work.

3) In order to accomplish these principles, forming a cohesive learning community in the classroom should be the primary means and goal. For instance, the teacher makes students physically face each other and makes them read their own work out loud, because each student

must speak out and each utterance must be heard by everyone in order to have diversity and collaborative decision making.

In this particular workshop by Taylor, the teacher attempted to find in each student's work some meaningful points to be shared in the class, with the intention of making everyone overcome their fears of expression. The meaning of this teacher's act wasn't limited to this. The point was that not only teacher's constructive critique, but also her or his connoisseurship and expertise must be shared by everyone in the class by following the teacher's lead.

In many cases, the teacher's comments seemed successful in stimulating further comments from the students. Creating a safe atmosphere in the classroom is a critical role of the teacher. The teacher's device for this was pointing out a feature in the student's work and making connections with a past figure or well known work or even contemporary works of his own peer-authors. It must be noted that the teacher of the workshop can never disregard the necessity for possessing a strong grounding in the scholarship of her field, especially when offering critique in a workshop like this.

6. Three indices that demonstrate the quality of learning brought about by the workshop method

As the outcome of this idiosyncratic workshop practice, we could identify some critical features of students' experiences besides the students' products—the art works. Here, we mainly attend to the interview data that shows the characteristic quality of the workshop experience for the students' part that, we assert, indicates the success of this workshop teaching method.

1) Ideas not produced otherwise

In our analysis of the narrative interviews, we discovered that several students had learned that without the workshop comradery, they would not have been able to write many poems. The students wrote what they would never have otherwise dared to, merely for their own selves. The small class audience during the process of composition became close friends with whom they yearned to share new creations. One student said:

> *"That was one of the most private poems I've ever written, and if I had not been in the class, I probably never would have created it for anybody. It's the kind of idea I would normally never tell to anyone--things I think I may put on the paper but I never talk about to anyone. The activity was therapeutic, I guess. It is so important for us to articulate emotions and ideas out loud reading to a whole group."*

The aesthetic experience of performing a poem grounds ideas and emotions and gives them a human validity. Validity comes from the reactions of an audience in a performance setting, such as a lecture hall or theatre. The artist knows his language and ideas are grounded if they affect an audience and the audience relates emotionally and intellectually to his work. Poorly written work is not grounded. It flies up and away into the air and does not land in the listeners' ears to move them.

2) Changing conception of poetry

Through analysis of the narratives, we found a deeper understanding of the creative process, with many comments such as, *"It is not just a natural gift; a lot of working and revising makes the*

poem." That was a direct achievement of this workshop.

3) Aesthetic demand

Many students mentioned a heightened aesthetic demand toward creative writing. One student said;

> *"When you are doing something for a grade, you will not be as honest as when you are doing something just because you want to do it. And just because you are, you need to do it. Because you are going to be making something true, honest and good, instead of working to get a good mark on an assignment. There are two different demands here."*

We can see in this comment that an aesthetic demand ― the strong desire to do good work to please oneself and an audience, not merely to please a teacher ― was developed in the workshop.

This kind of expressive learning can, at times, exceed learning that is motivated more exclusively by grades. We saw that one purpose of the workshop is the development of an aesthetic demand in each student poet. In the over one hundred short poems spontaneously written at the last class period, by each student for each student, the use of both more vivid and more musical, poetic phrasing is evident in such phrases as "you will see soft fields of light and strong hands about you," "at night the leaves break", and "always with this breaking I withstand all." Such self-motivated aesthetic demand, developed in relation to others in a workshop, leads to careful revision and better poetry. The aesthetic activity, as a crucial activity beyond solitary writing and self-appreciation, is defined and validated as a means to improve student work.

7. CONCLUSION : The Significance of the Workshop Method of Teaching as part of an Alternative Paradigm to the Teaching-Learning Paradigm

1) The modern school system has focused on learning as knowledge acquisition among separate individuals. On the contrary, the workshop method of teaching is a method of meaning-making and learning in the context of co-experience in a learners' community, providing a way for producing richer artworks by students. It brings about a richer learning experience in collaboration within a small community, richer in terms of knowledge as well as active motivation.
2) The workshop method of teaching is able to create an aesthetic demand in students. The meaning of learning is not reduced to an individual trying to meet the standardized objectives.
3) For arts education, it is extremely important that you are not rigidly oriented to any pre-set objectives, or ends-oriented activity which has been the hallmark of the modern school system. Individual ranking through evaluation based on pre-determined objectives is at the furthest remove from the shared experience in the workshop method of teaching.
4) It became clear that academic achievement, including knowing certain standards, should never be underestimated in the workshop method.

8. Recommendations

It is possible to apply this method of teaching to broader educational settings such as the junior high school classroom. The three indices ― ideas not produced otherwise, the changing

conception of artistic creation, and fostering a sense of aesthetic demand-will also be the kind that encourage and develop good practice in art education in the classroom setting. This workshop teaching method celebrates the diversity of students and the unity of the learning community, which is one of the most called for needs in education today.

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