

3-3-2015

## The Expressive Teacher: Renewing Vitality through Arts-Based Professional Development

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### Recommended Citation

Dalton, J. E. (2015). The Expressive Teacher: Renewing Vitality through Arts-Based Professional Development. *Journal of Art for Life*, 6(1). Advance online publication. <http://diginole.lib.fsu.edu/jafl/vol6/iss1/8>

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# The Expressive Teacher: Renewing Vitality through Arts-Based Professional Development

## **Abstract**

The arts can offer a valuable professional development model inviting teachers to reflect critically on their practice while gaining new knowledge and beliefs about teaching and learning. This paper documents the results of a study designed to investigate the changes K-12 teachers experienced when participating in arts-based professional development workshop. All participants reported experiencing either or both professional and personal benefits from the workshop. Teachers described forming new interpretations, differentiating among previously constructed ideas, and transforming these into new knowledge, which they reported gave them a new lease on their teaching careers.

## **Keywords**

Arts-based Professional Development, Teacher Renewal, Teacher Education, Creative Arts

The Expressive Teacher: Renewing Vitality Through Arts-Based Professional Development

I believe in art.  
I do not believe in the “art world” as  
it is today.  
I do not believe in art as a commodity.  
Great art is in exquisite balance.  
It is restorative.  
I believe in the energy of art, and through  
the use of that energy, the artist’s ability  
to transform his or her life and, by example,  
the lives of others.  
I believe that through our art, and through  
the projection of transcendent imagery,  
we can mend and heal the planet.

(Audrey Flack, 1986, n.p)

Since the beginning of time, the arts have been a part of the human experience. Our ancestors painted on the walls of caves, sang, and performed dances of ritual and celebration. In ancient times, and today, art lives on as a life-essential (Dissanyake, 2001). Celebrating the invisible thread that connects humanity, the arts have documented our history, providing meaning, and shaping our experiences across time. As an essential part of humanity, the arts provide a continuous thread that connects generations through imagery, movement, and voice. Through the process of making art we engage in an experiential activity that affects us internally, touching upon emotion and thoughts while also offering a tangible object that serves as a source of inspiration, self-awareness and possibly healing (Atkins, Williams & Suggs, 2007; Levine, E, 2003; Malchiodi, 2005; McNiff, 1992, 2004; Rogers, 1993).

Today, teachers are faced with challenges to renew their energy and commitment to teaching; professional development that only prescribes pedagogical templates diminishes a teacher’s range of performance by narrowing skill levels, reducing creative responses and time teaching. It denies opportunities for teachers to replenish their hearts and intellect (Coward, 2003; Nieto, 2005). Palmer (1998) noted that education is “more obsessed with externals, shrinking the space needed to support the inner lives of teachers” (p. xiii). He supported the inner work of teachers, believing it can help teachers reconnect with their students and empower them to stand with conviction in opposition to the forces that threaten to undermine the profession.

With the standards-based movement and accountability that aims to recompense teachers using extrinsic factors such as salary and benefits, the focus has shifted from addressing the inner world of the teacher and the factors that inspire and motivate teachers to continue to teach. Pinto (2004), when referencing the value of artistic experiences in education explained, “survival dictates that we subordinate our creative poetic self to a more practical, prosaic self. We go along and forget who we are or who we were” (p. 37). Conversely, Vygotsky (cited in Oreck, 2001) who called art “the social technique of emotion—an essential psychological mechanism for

finding equilibrium with our environment” (p. 7). Vygotsky (1971) believed that emotions are central to the artistic experience by restoring feelings and sensations into the lived experience.

Teachers bring who they are to the classroom, their whole selves: emotional, mental, and physical. Without professional development that values and supports the affective aspects of a fully-engaged teacher, education falls short on the goal of reaching and teaching all students. Palmer (1998) stated that, education reform fails to legitimize a teacher’s selfhood in most dialogues about school improvement. He explained that a teacher’s life is three-fold: intellectual, emotional, and spiritual, each requiring attention and depending on the other for wholeness. Palmer (1998) explained, “reduce teaching to intellect, and it becomes a cold abstraction; reduce it to emotions, and it becomes narcissistic; reduce it to the spiritual, and it loses its anchor to the world” (p. 5). When teachers begin to use the arts as a tool for awakening creativity, they draw upon internal sources from within, affirming their talents and finding words, movement, sounds, or images to illustrate their experiences (Powell, 1997). Powell expounded on how the arts can be liberating and inspiring for individuals who otherwise focus a great deal of time on assessing and evaluating others and being assessed and evaluated themselves.

While there are no quick fixes, arts-based professional development does hold the potential to support the mental, emotional, and physical needs of teachers. Research on professional development that included artistic production has been found to be as effective for renewal as reflective and critical discourse (Rud & Oldendorf, 1992). Aesthetic experience and artistic production provide what Dewey (1938) termed freedom of intelligence when referring to internal and cognitive freedom through arts experiences. Recent trends in teacher training have decreased the amount of freedom of intelligence that teachers experience in professional development (Rud & Oldendorf, 1992). New statistics in education indicated:

the seriousness of the violence against teachers, by the numbers of teachers that have retired early with stress-related ill-health and the large number of newly qualified teachers that fail to take up appointments in schools or leave the profession within five years of completing training. (Carlyle and Woods, 2002 as cited in Harris, 2007, p. 1)

With their proven effectiveness in professional development, the arts hold the potential to alter the course of teacher attrition and burnout.

### **Drawing upon the Affective in Teacher Renewal**

Teacher renewal that addresses the need for reflection, spirituality, community, and creativity is available to relatively few (Coward, 2003; Rud & Oldendorf, 1992; Whitlock, 2003). Unlike professional development that aims to reform by teaching techniques or skills, renewal programs aim to address the long-term growth teachers need. There are critical differences with professional development based on teacher reform versus those based on the concept of teacher renewal (Shea, 1992). Reform often assumes blame and targets those who appear to be holding back progress, and often are directed toward members of a group, such as a school, or school district, thereby offering little variability in practices (McPherson, 1990). Renewal models of professional development are based on experiences that are self-renewing and self-actualizing. When defining renewal, Shea (1992) clarified, “To re-new is to restore to original quality, to count on what already exists but may be hidden... Renewal is by its nature personal, and the restoration of confidence and skill and commitment and energy varies dramatically from teacher to teacher” (McPherson, 1990, pp. 15-16). Teacher renewal programs address the needs of career teachers by providing personal and professional development that supports intellectual, emotional, and spiritual growth (Palmer, 2004).

Two qualitative studies on teacher renewal that dealt with the vocational aspects of teaching, (Carotta, 1999; Whitlock, 2003), arrived at similar conclusions that teacher renewal must be understood as a process, allowing educators to develop personally and professionally, navigating both the inner and outer life. Arts-based professional development that recognizes the diverse talents of teachers also supports the development the diverse talents of their students (Robinson, 2009).

In this paper, my intention is to show evidence that art is much more than merely artistic expression and holds the potential for a connection with inner wisdom that can provide guidance, soothe emotional pain, and revitalize well-being. Rud and Oldendorf (1992) proposed teachers should be viewed primarily as learners and inquirers, and that education is fundamentally an activity of continuous renewal and exploration. “An infectious enthusiasm nourished by cognitive and artistic adventures must be at the core of a teacher’s worldview” (p. 45). In a recent study (Dalton, 2012), K-12 teachers participating in arts-based professional development explained that by stepping out of the classroom and one’s comfort zone, a liminal experience was created where the imagination could offer surprising and unexpected results. Arts-based professional development experiences remove teachers from the mental realm into the affective and emotional methods of thinking and knowing, reconnecting them with their poetic capacities and innate expressive natures. Through the arts, connections surface that engage both cognitive and emotional pathways, affirming personal, cultural and spiritual values (Hubard, 2007). This suggests that arts-based experiences may provide ways to cope with change and the unknown in expressive and independent ways that can support self-awareness and self-care and strengthen identity.

### **Overview of the Workshop and Participants**

To examine the affects of professional development in the arts on teacher perspectives, twenty-three K-12 teachers were interviewed for this study out of a total of 46 in attendance at three separate workshops. Participants in this study self-selected this arts-based professional development workshop and arrived with varying degrees of experience in the arts. Information gathered from registration forms, observation, and informal conversation with participants demonstrated that the teachers were as diverse as the locations and classrooms from which they came. Teachers came from North Carolina, Maine, New Hampshire, California, and Massachusetts, from small coastal towns like New Bern, NC, isolated and rural towns such as Calais, ME, to larger metropolitan areas like Charlotte, Raleigh and Durham, NC, and Los Angeles, CA. Further, personalities could be described as introverted, enthusiastic, downtrodden, hopeful, soft-spoken, and outgoing. The teachers’ interests ranged from spending time with family to making greeting cards, playing music, hiking, and reading books. Content areas of teachers were equally diverse as were the teachers’ schools, public and private, with small classes and limited resources in the rural schools, to classrooms brimming with diversity and urban challenges in the larger schools.

In this study, teachers’ motives for selecting this workshop ranged from seeking personal renewal to needing to learn tools to improve teaching. Several teachers spoke about how their burnout was negatively impacting their attitudes and teaching. They offered as examples: being a drone, using prescribed templates, state pacing guides, teaching to the test, and high levels of paperwork, all of which stood in the way of creative teaching and personal enthusiasm. After 15 years in the classroom, James, a reluctant conversant and soft-spoken social studies teacher, shared that he sees teachers suffering from burnout all the time. He shared a story of his colleague who explained how she was literally on the edge. James explained, “It just touched

me, because I feel like a lot of teachers are there and it's growing. It's not really a great place to be."<sup>1</sup> Betsy said, "I felt the call to teach, but I am disillusioned with the system." Another participant, Susan, shared, "I was thinking about leaving teaching all together. I had a very difficult couple of years, and I was really having a hard time finding balance in my teaching practice, and I was very burnt out and very overwhelmed."

The teachers who participated in this research expressed several needs for renewal such as feelings of isolation, being overwhelmed, loss of creativity, lack of collegiality, apathy leading to sadness and disillusionment, and self-described burnout. Other reasons included having had a difficult year, challenging administrators, and needing to leave the profession. As teachers spoke about their individual reasons for attending the arts-based renewal workshop, deep emotion was often present with tonal emphasis or body language that reflected the impact these activities had on teachers' identities and their well-being. The various arts aided teachers in understanding aspects of their personal and professional lives they may have forgotten, buried, or suppressed.

In this research study, arts-based professional development was used to support teachers in finding renewal that included painting, writing poetry, visual arts, dancing, drumming, singing, storytelling, and creative movement. Teachers explored a variety of art activities and discovered spontaneous expression that allowed for a greater sense of well-being and self-awareness. Through the arts, teachers made connections that were educative and provided a means of understanding their place in the world. Hubbard (2007) described this method of acquiring knowledge as "embodied learning"—a process that allows for integrating the dimensions of the self (p. 51). Throughout the art-making experiences, teachers were encouraged to explore and reflect upon the full range of emotions and bodily sensations that surfaced, learning to move through the experience creatively, gaining information and knowledge from sensory awareness. One participant explained, "The poetry exercise made me really look inside myself, and it was a very moving experience, and I cried. I never cry, but I cried." She later explained the tears were a release of emotion she needed to experience. Another participant declared, "Wow! I'm noticing a whole new world through my senses." The body, that is, the participants' bodies, became the teacher through shifting perspectives from primarily cognitive knowledge as a source of information to emotive and sensory information, revealing insights and AHA! moments.

#### **Teacher's Stories: Expressive Painting and Drawing**

Exploring a variety of artistic modalities throughout the professional development experience allowed teachers to express a range of personal experiences. Julia believed her encounter with painting and the subsequent feelings that emerged accurately described her body's ability to inform her mind through the senses. She wrote an email to me describing her process of discovery, and the emotions that emerged alongside her bodily reactions. She explained:

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<sup>1</sup> All such quotes are the result of personal conversations with participants.

**Figure 1.** Expressive Painting



*Embarrassment.* I know I want to groove to the music, but will someone think I'm pretentious? *Detachment.* Hmm, this is interesting, my hand isn't really brain connected right now. *Freedom.* Let it happen. *Introspection.* So, I like black/white, horizontal/vertical, but the red and blue colors like to swirl. What's up with that? *Exhilaration.* Wow! What a blast! I don't care what others in the room think. *Anxiety.* I can't put this yellow on; this is stupid. Get over yourself. *Fear.* I don't know if I can keep doing this. *Grief.* Why am I so sad? *More anxiety.* Am I going to have to leave? *Panic.* I don't know how to stop this fear or finish this picture. *Acceptance.* Just go with it, you're not going to die. *Relief.* I didn't quit. *Pride.* This is important to me. *Humility.* Thank you.

Julia further described her experience, "I didn't run from the experience, but accepted it as it came." She chose to stay with the sensations and what she was experiencing, allowing curiosity to fuel her actions, while recognizing and honoring related emotions.

Sonia shared how the opportunity to work on the large acetate canvas allowed her to work more freely and expansively, offering insights into her personal practice and classroom pedagogy. She described:

**Figure 2.** Acetate Canvas Body Paintings



My neck was looser, and I was more open. I want to remember to get kids working big in class, so they're not all hunkered down and private. Creating is a personal act, but to be open to working in the group, sharing experiences and possibilities with each other, is more possible if the group is up, open, and mobile, rather than pinned to seats and little spots on the table, heads down. When I worked big I noticed a more flexible neck, upper body, and mindset.

Recognizing her neck as the place in her body holding tension, Sonia was reminded of the importance of engaging in movement that released tension, understanding how remaining loose allowed her to open to receiving information. Simultaneously, she recognized this would be equally important for her students sitting all day in classrooms.

Erin shared that when she was drawing her mandala she was calm and centered. Prior to this activity, she expressed her tiredness and overactive thinking that kept her agitated and unable to pause. She explained: "I had so many random thoughts bombarding my thinking and now I am more cohesive."



**Figure 3.** Mandala Drawing 1



Elizabeth reported that she also experienced relaxation after drawing her mandala, noting she experienced feeling happy and ready to learn about herself as an artist, knowledge produced by an art experience that induced joy and relaxation.

**Figure 4.** Mandala Drawing 2



When describing their bodily sensations participants used words such as, flushing, heat, quick shallow breathing, elevated heart rate, shakes, tears, deep breathing, calming, relaxing, tired, reflective, joyful and a way of knowing. Concerns about the past or the future were put aside allowing participants to focus and expand their awareness of places in the body that were holding unwanted thoughts, patterns, or beliefs. As Sonia explained she became aware of where she was tight and uncomfortable, when she experienced freedom from these uncomfortable feelings through painting, and paid attention to the information her body was providing.

When referencing the benefits of this arts-based professional development workshop, Kate said:

[It] should be required training because it is like hitting the reset button on teaching! Escaping from our daily routines and pressures allowed us to direct our attention on ourselves. The seminar forced us to stop thinking about our students and focus on our personal well-being. For a week we intellectually inhaled cleansing breaths of the purest air!

### Finding Voice through Poetry

Poetry prompts were used in all three workshops to encourage teachers, both professionally and personally, to connect with their identities, give voice to their sense of self, and promote awareness of the world. The poetry prompts and writing exercises were designed to encourage self-reflection, either as a stand-alone activity or as a reflection response to visual imagery. Joanna's experience of writing and sharing her poem about teaching (see below) struck a chord with other participants in the group. When she received accolades of acknowledgement, she glowed. Her poem became a catalyst of change for the week, igniting confidence in others who deeply identified with her frustration and challenges in the workplace. Her poem emerged from challenges with the educational system and frustration with testing constraints. "I think it had been building up inside of me over the years," said Joanna, but until she was given space, a writing prompt, and creative freedom, her frustration remained buried. Once it emerged, it provided cathartic release of frustration and anger that transformed into a structure of support for understanding her initial purpose for becoming a teacher. Several months after writing the poem, Joanna shared with me how the poem she wrote helped to reframe the reason she showed up at school every day. She explained the courage she gained at the workshop gave her the strength to share her writing with her own school community. In part, her poem reads:

I don't teach test scores, I teach children  
I teach tall ones small ones all different colored ones happy ones sad ones loud ones quiet ones...anyone who comes in to my classroom

I don't teach test scores, I teach children  
I teach children who love to sing and love to dance and love to draw and paint and love to stretch out and run and play, but those gifts aren't valued because you can't bubble in the response on a scoring sheet.

I don't teach test scores, I teach children  
I don't teach differentiations, or free lunch programs, I teach children  
I don't teach EOG's, IEP's, PEP's, EOY's, AYP's or any other abbreviation  
But if you would let me love children, let me nurture children, let me experiment, let me fail, let me create, let me send forth, let me encourage young minds out of the darkness into the brilliant light of KNOWING  
If you would let me TEACH  
Then I will stay in the classroom  
Your children will be happier  
And your test scores will blossom and grow, just like the children have  
'Cause I don't' teach test scores, I teach children. (personal communication, 2010)

Joanna's poem was empowering because she gave voice to concerns and frustrations shared by many teachers, and provided an accessible and deeply personal delivery.

Not all teachers felt their poems were cathartic, or healing, but just the chance to write a poem about themselves was a celebratory experience. I also observed how poetry and free verse gave teachers permission to write without structure and limitation, using a voice that was filled with emotions and rich in experience, giving shape to experiences that might not be conveyed

through linear writing or journaling. Their poetic voices differed noticeably from the classroom voices they used for disseminating facts and information. The creative use of words enhanced communication and provided an alternative method of self-expression for teachers.

### **Findings**

The qualitative findings in this study affirmed that for the teachers in this study, arts-based experiences provided positive personal and professional impact on their lives and teaching. Through artistic expression, teachers found an emotional outlet, expanded mental capacities, strengthened imaginative capabilities, and recognized the importance of nurturing and supporting their inner and spiritual lives. Depending on the modality and the individual comfort levels, reluctance or hesitancy at times preceded the experience before producing change that could be defined. By stepping into unfamiliar territory and successfully emerging with a new skill or understanding, success and accomplishment often translated to a renewed sense of confidence. Kate described how the workshop provided “a definite feeling of empowerment. My own insecurities about my work in teaching and my own art can be overpowering. The workshop and voicing my opinions reinforced my convictions.”

Without solicitation, teachers generously shared ideas for transferring what they learned back to the classroom, enthusiastically emphasizing how the expressive and emotive strategies they learned could support students, beyond the coding, storage, and retrieval of data. Arts-based experiences in a professional development model provided teachers new avenues to articulate embodied experiences, merging old knowledge with new insights.

The findings suggest the importance of tending to the affective domain as well as the cognitive when seeking to create school change through effective teaching. In today’s statistic-obsessed drive for performance that breeds a culture of stress, honoring the triad of the human experience; intellectual, emotional and physical is necessary for human balance. This study suggests that arts-based professional development coupled with engaged reflection supports the innate capacity of the individual to interpret, find meaning, deepen self-awareness and transform one’s personal life. Harris (2007) explained, “[D]eveloping awareness can therefore be understood as a key means to help individuals recognize the defences [sic] or façade they have constructed in order to survive their life experiences and to re-connect with their actualizing tendency” (p. 64). Teachers who increase awareness can then work towards becoming authentic through greater self-knowledge, self responsibility and self determination (Harris, 2007).

### **A Final Word**

A teacher’s life is comprised of both the inner self and external world. This research suggests that affective, physical, arts-based professional development that supports teachers’ inner worlds and core values is useful in the constantly shifting experiences of classrooms, schools, and the teacher’s world. By capturing and making meaning of one’s experience through artistic means, teaching becomes less static and, affectively, embraces transitory experiences as the basis for action, reflection, and ultimately transformation. By engaging in the arts, the human voice is given an outlet for meaningful and essential expression. Eisner (2003) described these “actual actions of art” (p. 382) as artistically rooted qualitative forms of intelligence, that are not the sole domain of artists and the fine arts, but of all professions, whether a surgeon, a cook, an engineer, or a teacher.

Discussions about professional development in education should recognize the benefit of expressive methods that recognize teachers, students, and their classrooms as different and unique and constantly moving between ever-changing worlds of knowledge and experience. I contend that arts-based professional development of the sort provided in the teacher renewal

program provides *cognitive synthesis*, a cohesion of the mind, body and spirit through the intrinsic properties of the arts that enables participants to negotiate new meaning through articulation of embodied experiences, merging old knowledge with new insights.

An essential and important challenge faced by teachers who aim to succeed and be fulfilled in their profession, is to find ways to continually renew their energy and commitment in the face of burnout and boredom. Repetition in tasks and prolonged periods of work will always exist; however, finding tools to regenerate and renew energies are paramount for sustained commitment. Arts-based professional development offers an alternative to reform-based professional development for keeping experienced teachers vital, committed, and passionate about their profession. Teaching is an on-going reinvention of practice needing tools that support flexibility, adaptability, and creativity in today's ever-changing 21st century classrooms. Teacher training that includes such tools may provide an opportunity to incorporate attitudes, beliefs, and values along with the cognitive; content knowledge and pedagogy, thereby, expanding the focus to include the affective domains of learning. As evidenced by the responses of participants in this study, along with the strong body of research supporting the benefits professional development; policy makers, education leaders, and politicians should recognize the need for change that embraces a holistic arts-based approach to affirming teachers and renewing their spirits toward their continued in their profession.

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