Keep On Going...

Jane Bates

Abstract

In this article I make a case for holistic art education and demonstrate the transformative power of art and art teachers through two interconnected stories. The first is about my introduction to art in my sixth-grade class, and how this experience changed my life. The second, set more than fifty years later, is about my retirement from and return to teaching. These stories address why a holistic approach to teaching is so important and relevant today; relate how I came to develop my own approach; and describe how I implemented it in a teacher-training course. The message they send is that art matters and that we as artists and art educators need to keep on doing what we do.

Hearing, a year ago, that this issue of *Artizein* would be dedicated to "stories that mattered," I was excited by the idea, as well as the possibility of responding to it. I needed something positive to focus on. I had recently published a book called *Uniting Body, Mind, and Spirit Through Art Education: A Guide for Holistic Teaching in Middle and High School* (Bates, 2020). Boxes containing copies of it had been shipped to Minneapolis just days before the 2020 National Art Education Convention was scheduled to begin and was then cancelled because of COVID-19. At this time, early in the pandemic, I could not yet see the big picture or what was still to come, and I was concerned over my lost opportunity to present my book in person and share experiences and stories with colleagues face-to-face.

Like all teachers, I have many stories about experiences in the classroom. A number of them are included in this book. Two, which are particularly fitting for the theme of this journal, I now take this opportunity to share here.

1953

I am eleven, and I have just arrived in my sixth-grade classroom. Before I got here, I had attended four other schools. I can barely read and write; the only state I can identify on the map is my own; and I don't know one fact about the Civil War. The problem was not one of nature–my brain worked fine–but nurture. When my brother and I were six and seven, our parents divorced, and my father walked out of the house, vowing never to see any of us again. He made sure we were secure financially, but my mother struggled on an emotional/psychological level. Whenever things got to be too much for her, she sold our home, packed up her things (my brother and me among them), and moved to another place.

I share this not only because of its significance in my own development and journay, but also because of its relevance in education. Anyone who has ever spent time in the classroom has come to see at some point that teaching is about nurturing the student as much as addressing the subject. Clearly, if our recent experience of confinement, isolation, and education restricted to distance learning has taught us anything, it is the importance of attending to the holistic well-being of learners.

Art educators are particularly well-positioned to do this, to perceive and respond to the needs and expressions of students. My sixth-grade teacher certainly knew how to do this. What or who she initially saw in me – a shy, insecure pre-adolescent perceiving herself to be invisible – I do not know. I was far too withdrawn to reveal anything about myself or my life. I do know, however, that she went out of her way to draw students out, draw students in, and draw students together through games, collaborative activities, music, and art. All of this, the art part especially, delighted me. I had spent countless hours at home, in my backyard, in the eucalyptus groves of my neighborhood, climbing trees and quietly communing with nature and my inner world through drawing and painting. I loved art. And I knew that I was good at it, that it was something I could do – but I had yet to reveal my true ability in the classroom.

Then one day it happened: the teacher asked us to look through science books and paint a picture of something we were interested in. Not knowing its significance as a symbol of transformation, I chose the monarch butterfly. I drew four variations on a large sheet of paper; I mixed the perfect combination of reddish-orangish-brownish paint; I detailed the wing patterns in the most delicate lines. It took weeks. But during this time something else was happening: other kids began to notice me, talk to me, even come to me for advice on their projects. I became known as "the class artist." I'm not invisible at all! I am a real person. I have an identity – and I matter.

Art matters. Artists matter. Art teachers matter. And this particular teacher, Miss Williams, mattered more to me than she could ever have known. Inspired and emboldened by my experience in her class, I went on to become an art teacher, beginning a journey in 1965 that would last a lifetime. I was on a quest to make art, to experience the joy of artmaking, and to help others have such experience. This proved to be more challenging than I had imagined, however, and as I continued on, the path only got steeper...

2006

By now I have managed to pass sixth grade; progress through middle school, high school, and college; and build a career over a forty-year period teaching learners ranging from five-year-olds to graduate students. It is 2006, the year that, in order to care for my terminally ill husband, I retired. I am at this point running an art education program at a large university. I am teaching undergraduate courses during the day, graduate courses at night, and on my non-teaching days supervising student teachers, meeting with advisees, writing curriculum, and attending committee meetings. I am not making art or engaging in aesthetic experiences or feeling the joy of artmaking.

But, after my retirement and my husband's death a year later, I had a space in my life – a great, gaping hole, actually – which I filled with art. Holed up in my "cave" (make-shift studio in the basement), I dug into the experience, tearing, cutting, layering, gluing paper, making a series of images inspired by natural forms (flowers, seedpods, trees). I embellished these with radiant slivers of silver and gold foil, attempting to capture the energy, the vitality, of my husband, myself, nature, the Cosmos. I called this series "Life Force."

I stayed in my "cave," my inner space, for well over a year. When I was ready to rejoin the world, I shared my work with a colleague who invited me to give a presentation in his class, a master's level course for experienced art educators. The following week I arrived with arms fully loaded and pinned my work on the bulletin board. I asked the students, most of whom I had trained as undergraduates and knew well, to respond to it. One said it reminded her of O'Keeffe. Another saw a similarity to Klimpt in my use of gold foil. Another made a connection to Mondrian's abstract trees. Without any knowledge of the context in which I had created this work, the students had no way of delving deeper, of going beyond surface characteristics and understanding what these pieces were about or meant to me. And I was no help. Not knowing how to move into a conversation on such sensitive content, I simply nodded. Finally, a student whom I did not know said, "There's something else going on here. There's something you're not telling us." Tears welled up in my eyes as I thought about everything I was reluctant to tell them for fear I'd cry. Then I told them – and they cried.

At this point, none of us knew what to say or what to do with such intense feelings. We just sat for a while, in this shared space, silently communing with one another. When the time felt right I thanked my host and the students, and we all packed up our things and walked out, back to our separate lives. When I got home I was still quite shaken – I had cried in class, I had made others cry – but eventually I came to see, on a much deeper level, how transformational this experience was: I had been challenged to reveal myself and explain my art, to be real. This brought up all my old fears of exposing myself to the world as the person I really was. I felt extremely vulnerable. But in stepping out of my comfort zone, pushing past my tears and my fears, and telling my story, I crossed a boundary, a threshold, and walked through a door – and I had to keep on going...

What this meant, exactly, I did not yet know. But I did know that I had just participated in a profoundly moving encounter with these students. My tears had been an expression of my grief; theirs, an expression of their sensitive, caring, empathetic response to me. This experience had gone beyond sharing of my *art* to sharing of my s*elf*. The artwork had become a vehicle for connecting. Understanding this, I now knew what I had to do: I had to continue to make art; I had to continue to share myself as an artist and a teacher; I had to return to the classroom; and I had to find a way to involve students in making art, sharing art, and connecting through art in meaningful educational experiences.

My opportunity to do all this came in the form of an invitation to return to the university and teach a graduate-level course in multicultural art education. This was a course that I myself had developed, in the 1990s, but had not taught in many years. I thought I could use it as a base in moving into a holistic approach that honors the lives of learners by inviting students to address themes of deep importance and meaning to them (for example, as in my case, losing a loved one). When I reviewed my old syllabus, however, I was taken aback by the size of the gap between what I had once done and what I now envisioned. Reflected in it was an approach typical of educational practices of the time: students were introduced to various people(s) and their artworks, provided with cultural information pertaining to the works, and then directed to make objects that emulated them. These works were called "cultural exemplars," serving as examples or models of what to make, and were usually presented at the beginning of a unit of study. I call this approach "exemplar-driven teaching."

If I was to move from objecte-oriented, exemplar-driven teaching into a holistic, learner-centered, thematic approach, I needed to make some big changes. I began with a small one: rather than using the term "cultural exemplar," I used "thematic exemplar." This enabled me to present students with broad themes to which they could respond from their own perspectives and life experiences, as well as to address how others across time and place have reflected similar themes from their particular perspectives and life experiences. In this approach, thematic exemplars illustrate how ideas, concepts, experiences, and feelings have been conveyed in various ways through visual form. Using such an approach, I could encourage students to be self-expressive; help them connect with others within and outside that classroom; and move beyond what an artwork *is* (a thing, an object) and how it *looks* to what it *means* on a personal or cultural level.

My redesigned course, which I first presented in a five-week-long summer-session of 2011, was studio-based and thematically oriented. Themes included *identity* (promoting reflection on the self), *spirit of place* (promoting reflection on one's connection to the wider world), and *rite of passage* (promoting reflection on significant times/events shaping one's life). Because the themes were so broad, they allowed for a wide variety of interpretations, and in some cases motivated students to develop sub-themes of their own. For example, sub-themes addressed within the rite-of-passage unit included:
(1) growing up, (2) firsts, (3) identifying as an artist, and (4) experiencing loss. To provide a focus for this unit, I chose masks as the art form. In presenting the studio problem, I directed students to create a rite-of-passage mask for a ceremony commemorating a time or event in their past, present, or envisioned future lives. To prepare them to address this problem, I asked them to make lists of significant events or times in their past, present, and envisioned future lives. For the thematic exemplar, I chose cross-cultural ritual and ceremonial masks, which I shared through books provided during studio time when students were working on their own masks.

My primary objective was to promote authentic expression. But, recalling my painful attempt to share my own artwork, I knew I had to go beyond this. I had to find a way to facilitate sharing. I did this through artist statements. These were new to me – I had not used them in my previous teaching practice – and they were new to most of the class members. Students were free to express anything they wished about their artmaking experiences, artworks, and the meanings and stories behind them. These statements not only served as a vehicle for students to present their works, they also prepared students to share on deeper, more personal levels. This meant for them, as it had for me, that they might have to step beyond the boundaries of their own comfort zones, take a risk, and be vulnerable. This was not easy; but it did happen. And there were moments when we all cried and laughed and hugged, sometimes simultaneously. In working together in a shared studio space, these students, collectively, created a safe container in which it was okay to be real.

As both makers and teachers of art, the class members enthusiastically responded to the course. They were all experienced educators having spent from five to twenty years in classrooms across the full pK-12 spectrum. They had had time to develop their own artmaking skills along with their teaching strategies. These, however, were largely informed by the exemplar-driven approach through which most of them had learned to teach. They clearly saw the limitations of this approach as well as the potential of a holistic, thematic approach to broaden and deepen engagement. And they were eager to return to their own classrooms and try out new ideas fitting for their own student

populations. To provide some insight into how they experienced the course and what they reflected back to me as being most significant, I present the comments below, excerpted from their journals and final reflection papers:

Art gives us meaning. We give art meaning.

This experience helped connect the spiritual/emotional/contextual elements of art with the formal qualities of art.

This class has become like a small artists' community. We have grown as artists by witnessing each other work, plan, and share.

At first, I was unsure of the artist statements, but I feel this is where I grew most as an artist... without the writing, I would not have found such personal meaning.

The class helped me to realize I am more than I thought I was.

Today I realized that as an artist I cannot create works that do not embody my spirit/soul anymore.

So often we are trained to show an exemplar, teach a technique, and let kids do their thing... I love the idea of brainstorming and discussing a topic to get kids thinking.

This class made me realize the importance of sharing your work and telling your story. The students I teach don't really get the opportunities they deserve to tell their stories. I look forward to the upcoming year and advocating for holistic teaching.

Teaching is a marathon, not a race... I'm going to have to feel it out when it comes to applying ideas about themes and holistic art education. I'm excited to go back to the classroom and find spots where I have already applied these concepts.

I want my kids to have an actual connection with all that they create, to feel something as they are in the process of artmaking.

Why are we teaching art if not to provide students with a way to discover, create, and reflect on meaningful things?

2021

Rereading these comments today, a decade after I first presented this course, I am reminded of what it was essentially about: finding meaning – as a person, as an artist, as a teacher, as a member of the human community. I could not have articulated this when the course began, but once it was over I saw it. And, wanting to keep this going, I made it part of the art education curriculum. Then I wrote a book addressing holistic art education at all levels, but focusing specifically on middle and high school teaching. It contains a chapter visually documenting the course, a chapter documenting how participants carried their learnings into their own secondary-level classrooms, a conceptual model of holistic art education, and stories reflecting how I came to develop this model and my approach to teaching. The two I tell here (the first about my introduction to art in Miss Williams's sixth-grade class and the second about my retirement from and return to teaching) are not separate tales, but intertwining strands along the continuum of my becoming/being/becoming an art educator. They reflect my own journey as a person, artist, teacher, and member of the human community. But more than this, beyond my particular experiences, they demonstrate the power of art and art teachers to transform a life. I offer them here, in these still so fragile and uncertain times, in the hopes that they can inspire us all to keep on going…

References

Bates, J. (2020). *Uniting body, mind, and spirit through art education: A guide for holistic teaching in middle and high school.* National Art Education Association.

Author Biography

Jane Bates is a professor emerita at Towson University, where for 20 years, she directed the art education program. A lifelong art educator, she has taught in California, Germany, New York, Arizona, West Virginia, and Maryland, mentoring learners ranging from kindergarteners to graduate students. She is the author of *Becoming an Art Teacher* (2000) and *Uniting Body, Mind, and Spirit Through Art Education: A Guide for Holistic Teaching in Middle and High School* (2020). Today she supports her granddaughters (ages 13, 14, 15, and 16) in their artistic pursuits as they progress through middle and high school.

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