

Melvin passes Basic Art

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Peter London

Abstract

The author assigns a failing grade to a student in a high school required art course as a consequence of the student not doing any art at all. His chairman, stunned that anyone can actually fail art, offers a view of art and teaching and history that up ends the author's own views on the purposes of art, the purposes of teaching and his possible role in history. Confounded by the realization that there might be a domain different, more and better than the one he had been navigating, the author changes the student's grade, he was, after all, a deserving fellow of a philanthropic embrace, changes his own teaching and hopefully changes the world towards a somewhat better one.

This is a true story about a young man named Melvin who was enrolled in my high school Basic Art Class. To satisfy high school leaving requirements every student in the New York City school system at that time, the 1960's, was required to take and pass, amongst a number of other required courses, an art-type class. Therefore many students in those courses did not actually elect to be there. Certainly that seemed true for my basic art classes. Most students put up with this imposition and went along doing what the teacher asked them to do. Melvin was quite pleasant in refusing to do any art work at all in my art course. I tried to interest him in doing anything he liked to make, *anything*, but he always replied, Mr. London, I don't do art. I explained that this was an art course, and I would be most happy to allow him to do any art like thing and help him to do so. He said, always politely, Thank you Mr. London, but I don't do art. I explained that I would have to fail him if he didn't do any art at all. Any kind, just show some effort, and I would pass him. Melvin explained that he failed most of his courses anyway and he was just waiting until he turned sixteen to drop out of school. OK, Melvin, that's it? That's it. At the end of the term, what else could I do but give Melvin an "F"? And I gave Melvin an F.

As was procedural, the Chairman of my department reviewed my grades before officially submitting them, and noticing that I had entered a failing grade asked about how that person failed art. I told him this young man did not fail art, he didn't do any art, he failed to do anything. Really, said my Chairman, Was he disruptive? No. Did he bother the other students? No, in fact he was quite friendly and chatted with the others who didn't seem to mind that he did so. Was he helpful? Yes, he helped tidy up the room, ran errands for me. So why did you give him a failing grade, he seems like quite a decent fellow? Why? Because this is an art class and I am an art teacher and I am supposed to grade the student on the effort as well as the outcome of those efforts to make art.

Well, yes, Peter, my Chairman said, In that case this young man deserves to fail an art course. You are dutifully carrying out your responsibilities as an art teacher in a high school required art class and grades are given for making art. This young man is a student in an art class and is required to make art and be graded on his effort and quality of art work. You were right to fail him. In that world.

But Peter, there is another world right along side of that world. In this world there is a young man, the same young man that appeared in your art class. This person would benefit from something he does not have and will likely never have because of how he came to be. He is pleasant but like many, he has a fault; he cannot do something that many other people find easy to do. In this case, make art. It happens all the time. Also in this world there is a somewhat older man, you, and you have plenty of what this young man does not have. In this world, deserving and not deserving is hard to assign, so much of both worlds turning on ten thousand things and dumb luck. You could give this man something he needs and you have, in fact you make these things up; a “C”, or even a “B”. And you could give him one of these things, a grade, in this instance, out of mere kindness. Kindness undeserved, but that is no more than what so much of life is, undeserved. So, Peter, you could be an agent of historical imperatives and this young man and you would continue on your separate life trajectories, fulfilling everyone’s expectations. Or, you could change history, at least his and yours by a certain form of understanding and a not so random act of kindness.

Let me know what you decide and I’ll submit the grade. Melvin got a passing grade.

Author Biography

Peter London, Chancellor Professor Emeritus, University of Massachusetts Dartmouth. Distinguished Fellow, The National Art Education Association. Founding Chair, Art Education Department, UMD. Recipient, NAEA’s Viktor Lowenfeld Award, Honorary Doctorate, Maryland Institute College of Art. Taught and lectured in universities and art centers across the Americas, Europe, Israel and Japan. Author of dozens of articles on art and the creative processes, several books; “No More Secondhand Art,” “Drawing Closer to Nature,” and the forthcoming, “The Practice of Art.” Co-founder and first President NAEA’s Caucus on Spirituality in Art Education, Co- founder of Artizein. Designer, New Bedford Holocaust Memorial, President, New Bedford Center for the Arts, ArtWorks, Peter’s current art exhibition, the Pence Gallery, Davis, CA, “The Soul of Nature.” His professional papers are archived at Southern Illinois University, Special Collections.

