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WHO IS AT THE CITY GATES?
A SURREPTITIOUS APPROACH TO CURRICULUM-MAKING IN ART EDUCATION

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Abstract

The author relates the story of an exercise in curriculum-making that took place at The School at Columbia University as 4th graders responded to the erection of The Gates in New York's Central Park in the winter of 2005, a unique installation of conceptual art by artists Christo and Jeanne-Claude. The development of these responses over several weeks surreptitiously afforded each participant in this curriculum experience the opportunity to conceptualize certain methods and meanings most salient to them. This article opens a creative space for reconsidering some notions on what constitutes exemplary content, curricula, and criteria for assessment in art education by drawing upon the metaphor of gateways and the re-search of children.

“But not all who wander are aimless, especially those who seek truth beyond traditions, beyond definition, beyond the image.”

(From the movie Mona Lisa Smile¹)

Figure 1. An open gateway by 4th grader, Joey Weiman.

Figure 2. A balancing gateway by 4th grader, Sarah Sutto-Plunz.

Sometimes it is better not to meet a problem head on. Richard S. Prawat (1999) described a problem that has vexed educators and learning theorists for years, a problem that has been termed the learning paradox. The paradox attempts to address how it is that new and more sophisticated knowledge might be fashioned out of prior, less complex knowledge. In response, educators have commonly sought to design curriculum enterprises as if they were efficient and plumb lined architectural structures, evident in the language that asks teachers to develop “the conceptual foundations to frame and shape curriculum content and to align instruction and assessment tasks” (Stewart & Walker, 2005, p. 18). As it happens, I was a student of architecture long before I was a

student of the visual arts and it was apparent to me that contemporary architectural practice tailored itself after a formalist and scientific model situated within the modernist paradigm of progress. A curriculum architecture seeks the best solution to fashioning more sophisticated learning in the same purportedly inevitable way that “form follows function” in nature, a dictum popularized by American architect Louis Sullivan (1956).

Architectural Constraints

Architecture is a praxis that determines its final design from the convergence of known quality constraints: building usage specifications; structural safety standards; plumbing, electrical, and HVAC mechanical demands; available building materials; recorded property boundaries; client needs and proclivities; budget limitations; site-specific water tables and geological implications; neighborhood contextual fit; general cultural norms; building code requirements; labor costs; construction time windows; city and local zoning ordinances; labor union and general contracting agreements—even regional weather phenomena. The specificities addressed by an architectural design have given rise to the metaphors hidden in the notions of “building a curriculum architecture” and “providing a scaffolding for learning.” This remains evident in the glossary of one of the books in the recent Understanding by Design curriculum planning series, where the authors define curriculum as an effort to meet each and every “standard,” or quality constraint, in a “complete program, composed of numerous units,” reducing all possibility to the documentation of the most “explicit” and “comprehensive” solution (McTighe & Wiggins, 2004, p. 290). As any architect might confirm, after a variety of suitable planning models are explored, only one solution will be constructed.

Yet as a classroom teacher of art, I question the definitive ends that often accompany progressive enterprises in education. I question the pressure I have experienced to reduce curricular possibilities and learning outcomes to the space of a single document. I would argue that planning a learning outcome is not an architectural exercise. I believe that it is no longer in the best interest of a nation seeking to jump-start its characteristic innovation to perpetuate the rhetoric of a single best system of public educational practices, a nationalized set of quality standards. To attain toward the single best solution in the enterprise of public education, to mandate the same expectations for every child is to essentialize the character of learning as that of a product. When learning is characterized as a product that educators may be held accountable for, it is an attempt to assure predictable outcomes of learning, outcomes that are easy to standardize, easy to test for, easy to measure, easy to follow. But learning is no sure thing and it is not easy to map; there is no accounting for the ways in which children particularize their learning outcomes in spite of the best or worst schooling practices. Form does not always follow function in nature; life also creates mutative occurrences that precede unpredicted functioning.

While it is a fascinating pretense to suggest that across the nation, at any given grade-level, all children arrive at the same curricular destination during the same testing period, let us not kid ourselves. Planned learning outcomes do not construct minds; students figure themselves out. They will do so whether teachers help them or not. Moreover, “students learn both more and less than they are taught” (Eisner, 2002, p. 70). They take away from our “designs” only what they need, and only what they choose to. Life and experience writes its own curriculum, differently for each student, yet always in

some way brought into intersection with the learner's daily schooling experience; life and daily activity does not adhere to the lesson plans art educators write before the students arrival. In that spirit, the lesson described in this article is presented as **the collaborative adventure** of my students and I.

Venturing Beyond the School Gates

B. Stephen Carpenter writes of “teachers who bridge the content of two or more subject areas as a way to cross between disciplines. When some teachers and curriculum designers see a wall, others imagine a window, door, or bridge in its place” (Carpenter, 2005, p. 4). New York's Central Park has historically been viewed as an oasis of wilderness in the midst of the urban grid. In the late winter of 2005, 4th grade students from The School at Columbia University visited a one-time art installation in Central Park by artists Christo and Jeanne-Claude, a winding array of saffron-colored gates erected in the wilderness to serve some seemingly inexplicable purpose. In the space of this article, I am interested in the exploring the gateways all learners build between school learning encounters, life experience, and their wandering imaginations.

Figure 3. Christo and Jeanne-Claude's Gates in Central Park.

As a visual arts practitioner and an advocate for innovation in understanding and perception, I have seen the utility of allowing learning outcomes to become slowly apparent, marked out like the wandering hand upon a drawing tablet, becoming recognizable as an embodiment of learning only at the end of the exercise. To that end, I have become a proponent of the curriculum learning sketch rather than the curriculum lesson plan. Rather than designing a lesson, I prefer that a learning encounter develop as a sort of arts-based qualitative research collaboration between my students and I. Like the exercise of freehand drawing, a learning sketch tends to migrate around the constraints of predictability and measurement. Therefore, the working template I have

developed for my learning sketches includes a field for multiple outcome possibilities, as those possibilities come to mind.

Such possibilities are not pre-scripted, they are emergent. According to website information provided on the curriculum of an independent school in Vancouver, Washington, a curriculum may be considered emergent if it evolves in response to the initiatives and decisions undertaken by both adults and children, “diverging along new paths as choices and connections are made,” remaining “open to new possibilities that were not thought of during the initial planning process” (The Gardner School, 2006). Emergent curriculum choices became operative in my own art classrooms as we began to discuss our encounters with the Gates subsequent to our return from Central Park. I offered the opportunity to build our own gateways; classroom conversations began to proliferate ad hoc gateways of understanding in the form of imagined stories surrounding our handmade gateways; the learning possibilities I had in mind altered to include story craft, writing, and editing in the art studio as a way of revealing the ideas about gates the students were acquiring through their engagement with materials. In the following story, Abdul’s fiction reflects on the very real power of such gateways, the power to arrive at unexpected ends:

Once upon a time there was a man named Bob. He was a great explorer that searched different dimensions, but this one was special. It was the Gate Of Fate. It was red, blue and orange. It had stars and a red and blue cover. He didn’t know what was behind them but since red was his favorite color, he went behind the cover and it showed him into the hall of fame of explorers. He was amazed at

what he saw and until then he never told anyone. The end. (Abdul, personal communication, Spring 2005) (See Figure 4)

Figure 4. Abdul's Gate of Fate.

Pathways To Understanding

The Gates project was undertaken in early March of 2005 with three 4th grade classes of approximately 18 students each. I was working as a lead K-4 teacher for The School at Columbia University, which opened in New York City on September 17th, 2003 espousing an integrated and collaborative curricular format. The trip to see the Gates was first proposed to me by a colleague, an energetic 4th grade teacher named Nicole

Boucher. Nicole prepared the 4th graders for the outing by sharing a PowerPoint™ slideshow of the art of Christo and Jeanne-Claude, and discussing “some concepts behind their work ahead of time with the children” (Nicole Boucher, personal correspondence, February 27, 2006). As part of the second trimester of the school year, “Discovery” was the learning concept that teachers and students were exploring together as a grade; this exploration was within the construct of a grade-level theme titled “Me and My World.”

It occurred to me to put together a PowerPoint™ presentation reflecting on the concepts that can be represented by architectural structures. What can a window symbolize? What special meaning can a bridge represent? What is a gate? With my background as a freelance architectural modelmaker, I knew could facilitate construction with minimal assistance from the other 4th grade teachers, but it was up to the kids to do their own theorizing. The children gave responses such as “A window can be a portal,” and, “A bridge can represent a way to get to a new place.” I provided my students with cardboard, wood pieces, glue, tissue paper, construction paper, masking tape, scissors, a couple of miter boxes and small craft saws, instructing them in the use of the tools as necessary, and requiring that they work as each other’s assistants.

Every time I met with the 4th graders over the ensuing weeks, I set out supply bins around the room for the students to mine on their own and provided each student with at least one pre-cut 9 x 9 inch square as a base for their gateway; if a student requested combining more than one base or a base cut into idiosyncratic configurations, they had to measure out what they thought they needed and I then made provision. As the projects were initiated we discussed the practical considerations of balancing three-dimensional elements and thinking in the round. Furthermore, we continued to discuss

the past, alternative, and future places, the fabricated and the fictional spaces connected by these gateways to our known worlds.

A social-constructivist curriculum ethic began to permeate our work together, as students were allowed to learn what they wanted to learn, each following their own grain. Some students made bridges rather than gates. Some students locked their gates as part of an emperor's fortress wall. Some constructed not only a portal, but also the fantastic land on the other side. One student, Patrick, found in his materials a piece of wood that reminded him of a large proscenium arch, so he pronounced that he would make a movie theater rather than a gateway. Patrick was allowed to go his own way, building his theater with exacting detail and symmetrical zeal. According to Marsha Grace (1999), "(s)ocial-constructivist teaching and learning is nonconformist, open to variation in the outcome of what has been learned." Patrick's approach to the project suggests an unconventional response to the purported learning paradox: **new knowledge is fashioned in relation to prior, oftentimes ancillary, areas of knowledge.** Prior knowledge is never transcended by new experience; prior understandings coexist and connect with emerging development. New stories do not replace old stories; they merely overlay them in an archaeological accrual of meanings. Learners need only to gain a proficiency in the hand-wrought assembly of gateways and arches, betwixt and between.

The gate to the open mind is a gate that every one liked to go to for a new idea; there wasn't a person there or anything but there was a secret power to open the mind when there was something to remember that you forgot or you needed an idea, or needed confidence. No one knows how it happens but it does. Scientists

think that people just believe that it has powers, others think there is a genie, but the creator of the gate is the only one who really knows. (Zoë, personal communication, Spring 2005) (See Figures 5, 6, & 7)

Figure 5. Zoë's gateway invention, as it slowly opens...

Figure 6.

Figure 7.

Understanding is often wrought through untold connections. As Zoë suggests, who besides the creator of the gates really knows how? Her insight about provenance over one's idiosyncratic intellectual connections favors the very same student-centered

approach that afforded her the space to pursue her unique invention of a gateway hinge mechanism. In the “Principles of Student-Centered Learning” listed at an educational website located on the World Wide Web, a learner-centered model is described as creating space for students to “have opportunities and increased responsibility to identify their own learning needs, locate learning resources, and construct their own knowledge based on those needs” (InTIME, 2006). Thus, each student makes their way toward understandings all their own.

The notion that understandings can be achieved by design is a popular but I think misguided effort to channel learning outcomes toward adult ends. To begin with an expected end in mind is often a paralyzing event, especially for young learners. As children mature and are indoctrinated in the notion that all outcomes are guided, predicted, controlled, expected, and/or cajoled to approximate and approach adult exemplars, they eventually arrive at a point in their approach to drawing when if the first stroke on the page does not meet predetermined expectations, a drawing is often abandoned before it even begins. And yet the nature of mark-making in freehand drawing is such that the first stroke, the last stroke—and all the strokes in between—rarely ever meets predeterminations and almost always congeals into a one of a kind work of art!

Freehand Curriculum Notations

As art teachers, we are familiar with what are now typically called the “elements of art” or the “principles of design,” used to teach students that all works of art are constituted of some combination of the following individual elements (i.e., form, line,

shape, space, value, color, and texture)—and to teach that there are rules to making good art compositions (i.e., emphasis, balance, harmony, variety, movement, rhythm, proportion, and unity). But why should we treat these dictums as sacrosanct, as if they in themselves were the keys to learning, as if rule-breaking and coloring outside the lines were not the modus operandi of most artists? In holding these dictums central to the art curricula, I would argue that art teachers are mistaking tried and true building implements for the more compelling learning content and untried gateways that network human understandings. At this point in the story, let me wander a bit and revisit some sketches I first scribbled when I was still a doctoral student, a rethinking of the curriculum content and teaching motivations not only for art education, but also for education as a whole. These sketches became the outlines for the learning approach of the Gates project.

ART CONTENT INCLUDES:

One's identity; One's experience; One's beliefs; One's cultural practices; One's object encounters; One's family and friendship relations; One's arts affinities (e.g., visual, literary, performing, and the subcategories of each).

Art content may be reconsidered as knowledge as generated by the pupil. Even the information and ideas that educators attempt to transfer to students in school classrooms belongs to the student to unpack since what they pack from the original exchange between teacher and student is consistently a rearrangement of those concepts as their teacher knows them. **Art content is therefore each idea as it is known to the pupil's**

mind, in the way the pupil knows it, structures that knowledge, un-names that knowledge, locates self-image in that knowledge, adds to or subtracts from that knowledge, and conveys that reinterpreted knowledge content to others.

Curricular Provocation:

Who are you? Where do you come from? Who do you belong to? What will become of you? Where are you now? What do you know? How do you see this? What do you connect it to?

THE ELEMENTS OF ART INCLUDE:

Memory; History; Alphabet; Media Symbols; Material Properties; Social Conventions;
Cultural Debris; Mythology; Story.

The elements of art are only secondarily formalistic—the aforementioned form, line, shape, space, value, color, and texture. However, first and foremost they may be reconsidered as the innate and external concepts and properties which the pupil becomes adept in manipulating effectively; they are fundamental and can be wielded with varying proficiency by both child and adult; they are constantly in the pupil's hands to assemble to a compatible fit with their own sense of the world. **The elements of art are the socio-cultural and environmental manipulables that may either be introduced to, or elicited from, an individual pupil or group of students.**

Curricular Provocation:

Take this and make use of it. Make sense of it. Where does it fit in? Add to it. Take away. Push. Pull. Fill in the gaps. Communicate the place it holds in your life.

THE PRINCIPLES OF DESIGN INCLUDE:

Free Play; Discovery; Discarding; Intent; Interrogation; Risk; Revision; Imagination;
Metaphor; Alliance.

First introduced in the early twentieth century by painter and art educator Arthur Wesley Dow under the rubric of the Elements and Principles of Composition, the dictums currently touted as “the principles of design” may be reconsidered to include principles fundamental not only to art-making but to the process of refining understandings; they may be used singularly or in concert as routes to the re-composition of previously held perceptions. **These paths to refinement may lead to a previously considered destination...or to understandings hitherto unconsidered.** The pupil will have the responsibility of choosing the route(s), and the teacher the responsibility of supporting the pupil’s journey.

Curricular Provocation:

Do you need any provisions? Stop and refresh...no need to rush. Take the scenic route—
assess your surroundings. Mine for raw materials that will support your efforts.

Generate alliances to acquire new resources.

EFFECTIVE HABITS FOR ART-MAKING AND LIVING INCLUDE:

Observation; Improvisation; Sampling; Planning; Replication; Modification;
Simplification; Handicraft; Storytelling; Articulation; Intuition; Flexibility;
Collaboration; Apprenticeship; Service.

These are the habits of personal transformation that I will coach and which will be the premise of my curricular endeavors and my assessment of the effectiveness of my student's labors. I will assess the processes of art-making and of life-making, as well as the art product. **The working results of a thoroughly inhabited curriculum experience—one that transforms the understandings of the student, the teacher, the audience, and which brings about the transfiguration of social content—must always be valorized.**

Curricular Provocation:

How has the initial content been altered? Which of the learner's understandings transformed during the project's development? Which of the teacher's perceptions are transformed, added to, or discarded as the process is engaged? What gateways were erected and to where do they lead?

One of my students offers the following assessment of her Gates project and the meaning she had discovered and was attempting to convey:

My gate represents evaluation. Steps, milestones, paths you take through time and the choices you make. The first gate is a gate into the world, the second gate is into childhood, the third gate is into young-adulthood, and finally the last gate (the fourth gate) is into adulthood. After all the steps of my gate there are a whole new set of gates for adulthood that I have not added. Maybe many years from now I will add the adventures of adulthood, but I am not educated enough now.

(Annie, personal communication, Spring 2005) (See Figure 8)

Figure 8. Annie's Gate.

No Child Left Behind

Within my own subjectivity as an artist/researcher/teacher (Irwin & de Cosson, 2004), in undertaking the Gates project, I addressed myself with the following questions: Can the students find a connection to the symbolic content in a contemporary work of conceptual art? If given an opportunity to construct a gateway, what would a 4th grader build a gateway to? How abstract a thinker is a 4th grader willing or able to be? What can I learn from a 4th grader when I create a clearing for them not only to practice studio art-making, but to theorize about the meanings they are making? This article has attempted to tell the tale. I chose the option of working on the Gates project over a period of weeks so there was no rush. **In the art studio there is never a need to rush, no need to fear the final outcomes. No child is ever left behind when they are allowed to lead the way to their goals in life and learning.** Who knew that Malik wanted to be a star?

Once upon a time there were a boy named Malik...he always wanted to be a star. A movie star. So one day he walked around his neighborhood and thought that he can be a star. The next day he went to the park and he started to sing a song, "I'm going to be a movie star a movie star I'm going to broadwayyyyyy nobody is going to stop me." He also thought that he would never be a movie. So the next day he went to the park and he found a beautiful thing. It was a gate. He went through it and he saw blue and yellow. That reminded him of stardom so he went to Hollywood to be a movie star; then before he knew it he was famous. (Malik, personal communication, Spring 2005) (See Figure 9)

Figure 9. Malik's gateway to stardom.

As a community, learners and their teachers construct their own gateways to new understandings—now we must give them enough space to re-search (Wilson, 1997) their understandings, making those connections apparent for others to see. Here I have erected my own ad hoc gateways through the writing of this article and the writing of these 4th graders; you, the reader, are constructing still more gateways as you make your own sense of this writing. It would have been pointless, for this exercise, to test whether you have gone to the same place as I, for how could you have known? I did not know exactly where I was going either. In this case, curricular function follows formlessness; the varying solutions are therefore endless. Innovation effaces the norms most familiar.

The wind was terribly strong and the thunder and lighting boomed loudly in the sky. Rosa was stuck in the pasture tending to her sheep. Now that the rain had started she was huddled in a cave. Too bad she was near a river for as the rain fell the river rose up and up. She couldn't go to the west, because there are no places to go to. She couldn't go home for they had probably moved from the flood. Her only choice was to cross an old bridge that there were stories about. Good ones? Never! All the stories started on a day like this, but nobody, ever came back in the end. Rosa slowly tiptoed across the bridge just making it to the other side. She found nothing bad to say about the place the bridge had led her to. It was beautiful. Now she fully understood why no one ever came back. After that everybody found the bridge and crossed to the other side. They never regretted coming to the new place; and if they did they could cross over and back as many

times as they needed. (Olivia, personal communication, Spring 2005) (See Figure 10)

Figure 10. Olivia's gate is also a bridge.

Who is at the city gates? Only those we have allowed to leave the congested city—the pedagogical pastiche of competing curricular designs, schooling particulars, and shopworn lesson plans. Some learners have relocated; they are pioneers now, traversing discourses in worldview and life experience that must seem foreign to their former educators. Some are a bit lost—still fully human, none too perverse, yet fraught with intellectual wandering. Some merely want us to think that they are lost while they live on the margins of our curriculum documents, choosing to remain unimpeded in the

erection of alternative gateways. Some ride the rapids in unmapped climes, still in mid-trajectory along their journey. But some have returned to the city. They have passed through gateways, forged new trails, and carry home to us new treasures still in mind. Our students are restless as they mill about these shuttered city gates. Sometimes it is better not to meet a problem head on. Let them out. Let them back in.

Captions for Figures 1 – 10.

Figure 1. An open gateway by 4th grader, Joey.

Figure 2. A balancing gateway by 4th grader, Sarah.

Figure 3. The Gates in Central Park. Photograph by Dr. Graeme Sullivan.

Figure 4. Abdul's Gate of Fate

Figure 5. Zoë's gateway invention, as it slowly opens...

Figure 6.

Figure 7.

Figure 8. Annie's gate.

Figure 9. Malik's gateway to stardom.

Figure 10. Olivia's gate is also a bridge.

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¹ Retrieved February 28, 2006 from <http://imdb.com/title/tt0304415/quotes>