The Art Educator as Mentor

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The Art Educator as Mentor

A Christian Scholarship Essay

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We are the People of His Pasture and the Sheep of His Hand by Gene VanDyke. June 2009. In support of his Christian Scholarship Essay, “The Art Educator as Mentor.”
Introduction

Those who are called to be educators need to adopt the attitude that s/he has responsibilities for all the sheep (students) in His pasture. This is without regard to the extent of the students’ self-motivation, artistic talent, happiness and good demeanor, appearance, social class, etc.

This image of sheep in the pasture looking toward the viewer as though they are inquiring and awaiting a response is depicted in my painting, printed below. Like

![Image of sheep in pasture]

*We are the People of His Pasture and the Sheep of His Hand*


students in our classrooms, some of the sheep are alert and inquiring. Others are turning away, seemingly unmotivated, uninterested, or perhaps not understanding our teaching. Other sheep, like some of our students, are fading into the background. All the sheep though like our students are clearly important. This is demonstrated by the vivid colors and active brushstrokes.

This paper will identify some of the practices the K-12 art educator can use to most positively impact all their students, not just a few. Following are four categories that will
be reviewed and supported as those that can best enhance the art educator’s ability to mentor and affect their students’ lives:

- Christian Pedagogy
- Living the Christian Example
- A Christian and Compassionate Approach to Classroom Management
- The Creativity/spirituality Link

It is in the studio component of the art classroom that the ideal situation for the art educator to affect the moral and spiritual aspects of the students’ lives becomes apparent. McNiff (2004) reminds us that the art studio is like a spa, a watering place for the soul. The art studio or classroom is intended to prepare students to lead the world of tomorrow while living productively, creatively, and spiritually.
Christian Pedagogy

*Introduction.* The best Christian pedagogy is teaching by example and by *leading* student’s learning. Through questioning, instead of just telling, we force students to do the thinking and to come up with their own solutions (Fay & Funk, 1995). Content for these questions has many, many possibilities:

- What responsibilities does the visual artist have to the greater culture?
- Whose responsibility is it to teach the rural and urban poor?
- Whose responsibility is it to value and preserve the environment?
- What are the service opportunities in the visual arts?
- Etc.

*The Problem.* Many students, though surprising to some educators, have few if any one-on-one contact with other adults during the day. In many family units both parents work long days and are on their way to work before the child leaves for school and return home later in the evening. Today it is the rare family that sits together to eat their evening meal, much less has breakfast together. Informal surveys of Messiah College students affirm this to be true in their families as well.

*A Solution.* Art educators can fill this void created by the absent parent. It is, also, teaching by being by the students’ sides and sharing an enthusiasm for art, art education, and Christianity that we can impact the students’ lives. We can be the adult who has a positive impact on their lives each day. Furthermore, through this one-on-one contact in the art studio the art educator can find each individual’s needs and differentiate the learning for them by varying the pedagogy.

Caring for them involves taking a personal interest in each one and
taking responsibility for making school interesting, meaningful, and worthwhile. Caring about them requires that he establish his professional authority, setting high standards for student behavior and performance and holding all students to those standards. (Stengel & Alan, 2006, p. 4)

“Ernest Boyer clearly shows the influence of character educators (and) moves beyond to implicate the structure of the school as a moral medium,” recall Stengel and Alan, (p. 18). In fact, Boyer identifies, “A Commitment to Character” as one of his four priorities for schools, (Boyer, 1995, p. 10). Boyer’s other three priorities are (1) The School as Community, (2) A Curriculum with Coherence, and (3) A Climate for Learning (p. 10).

Many educators, like Boyer, see character development as a major responsibility of the educator and the educational system. It is no surprise either that Boyer’s friend and colleague, Elliot Eisner believes that how we interact with the students, how we reconcile conflicts with them, and indeed how we “treat the students” as being as vividly important as anything the educator does (Eisner, 2002, p. 57).

Through the cyclical nature of education over the span of years emphasis on students’ needs often fluctuates between the affective and the academic. Currently, the federal and State focus on the “No Child Left Behind Act” (NCLB) places the importance clearly and solely on the academic. Therefore, the art educator has a special responsibility and opportunity for the affective in the aesthetic, social, artistic, creative, emotional, spiritual and intellectual growth and the relationships between those areas of growth for each student.

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It is also important to help students understand that art and discipleship are related through the nature of servanthood according to Dryness, (2001). Therefore, service needs to be an integral part of the pedagogy and the students’ learning. Service learning is another affectively and morally motivated (many would say spiritually motivated) educational initiative that typically divides the academic from the moral (Stengel & Alan, 2006). Through service students come to understand the needs of many cultures and socio-economic groups.

Service projects for the art student can be directed to the arts. The Mural Arts Program in Philadelphia is a fine example and the program’s directors boast that they have just completed their 3000th mural in the city. Each mural done with the assistance of volunteers brings testimony to the power of service. The murals brighten and enlighten streets and neighborhoods throughout the city. The volunteer mural painters have attacked the visual blight and made the city of Philadelphia a more pleasant and reflective living environment for all its residents.

Other service projects for art students can include offering Saturday art programs to neighboring and urban students as demonstrated by the art education students at Messiah College. Locally, the Girl Scouts, the Boy Scouts, Big Brothers Big Sisters of America to name a few also have a need for volunteers to help instruct art projects. Opportunities nationally and internationally abound for service in the arts and can encompass not only instruction and mural painting but such duties as art and architectural restoration, art management skills, art business skills, design and construction of homes, schools, etc.

Summary. The art educator must seize the opportunity through his/her pedagogy
to provide an affective education as well as an education in the visual arts. It is important to ask students the difficult questions about life, their work and obligations to their community and to lead them to self-reflection and responsible actions. It is important for art educators to help their students fulfill their greatest potential, intellectually, professionally and spiritually. Included in this should be service learning requirements that should be clearly delineated in the course syllabi and required of each student.

Living the Christian Example

Introduction. Mac Kenzie (2003) confirms that we need to provide an example for students' lives. As teachers we are responsible to help students find meaning in their lives by upholding our own high standards of character, service and leadership. Students anxiously and with interest observe the teachers in their communities. What are the movies that they pay to see? Which restaurants or pubs do they frequent? Do they participate in the walkathons, serve in the soup kitchens, treat the grocery store cashier with respect, etc.?

The Problem. Educators have long been held looked upon by their students as role models. Educational administrators have held high expectations for their teachers' behaviors. The Pennsylvania Department of Education, the Pennsylvania State Education Association, and the American Federation of Teachers call have adopted and published a, "Code of Ethics" for teachers.

Historically, teachers' behaviors have been monitored and expectations for the teachers' behavior now seem overly rigid. For example, in the first half of the twentieth century, women teachers who became pregnant were expected to leave the classroom early in their pregnancy. Female teachers were not allowed to wear slacks. Male teachers
were expected to be cleanly shaven, wear a suit and tie even in the art studio and this was without exception. Even in the second half of the twentieth century many of these protocols continued.

*The Solution.* Fortunately in today's world many of the rigid “appearance” aspects of a good role model have given way to expectations for a role models' character and behavior. Art education can be a form of ministry and through our teaching of art we can inspire by example (Rollins in Romaine, 2002). This concept is so viable that the art educator, depending on their practice, could be seen as a minister to youth. This, of course, needs to be done outside the parameters of proselytizing in the public schools.

In a survey conducted by Ridnouer, (2006, p. 6) students responded that teachers who care about them, (1) made them feel like somebody, (2) believe that they could learn anything, (3) made them feel smart, and (4) help them feel good about themselves. The positive way in which we phrase questions, responses, greetings, etc. can present a compassionate approach and can greatly enhance the students' self-concept. Maintaining a positive attitude consistently about all children can be difficult as they test the teacher's patience and volley for attention. It seems especially difficult for the novice teacher to maintain a positive attitude. Often, the novice interprets students’ calling out for help and attention as a personal affront. It is only later in their career that they can see the behavior for what it is; a need for attention.

*Summary.* Students truly need their teachers as Christian examples. The teachers need to be the mentors that are available to listen, comfort, challenge, and offer compassionate support. We need to be there and available to our students (Ridnouer,
Kapikian, (2006, p. 80) quotes that, “Christians are called to love, hold, embrace and support, as brothers and sisters in Christ, all men, women, and children who bear in their bodies this mark of our falleness. As Christ comforted the sick and dying, so too must they if they are to aspire to the condition of his risen body, freed from the curse of disease and death.” In today’s world of constant change, students need their teachers to be consistently there for them. The art educator can be that constant and available presence in the art studio.

A Christian and Compassionate Approach to Classroom Management

Introduction. The characteristics of compassion and love are essential for the art educator and mentor. Through implementing these characteristics in working with their students they can set an example intellectually, spiritually, and artistically.

The Problem. Students come to us with their own sphere of influence created by their environment, their cultural identity, their genetics, and their biology according to Fay and Funk. Many times students come to us with low or fragile self-concept or self-esteem. How we work with the students in the art studio can have a positive impact on their self-concept and esteem.

The Solution. Fay and Funk, (1995) note, that a rule of psychology of self-concept states,

Human beings will perform for the person they love. If a person loves himself, he will do it for himself. If he does not have that high self-esteem or belief in self, he will have to do it for someone else until the time comes that he does love himself. They (experts

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in education) have conclusively shown that resourceful, well-adjusted kids have a good self-concept; and unresourceful, poorly adjusted kids do not. Allow students to own their own problems. The teacher can guide a student in solving a problem but should never let the kid’s problems become hers/his. When we see others highly involved in solving our problem, our tendency is to let them. (p. 20)

We find Jesus’ practice of compassion throughout biblical text, but most poignantly when helping those in need. “But by saying that only a sinless person could throw the first stone, he highlighted the importance of compassion…” (NIV, John 8:7). Students don’t need us to be judgmental of them, but they need us instead to forgive, understand, challenge and guide them in finding sound solutions. Through demonstrating this compassionate approach to them, they will in turn be able to offer the same compassion to others in the future.

Fay and Funk, (1995, p. 129) also confirm that, “Teachers who establish a relationship of unconditional acceptance and respect with students are at a great advantage.” This is cited by Ridnouer (2006) as well.

…the key to creating a learning community is to manage your classroom with heart—and by that, I mean permeate the classroom atmosphere with caring concern. This involves care in interactions with students, lesson planning, seating chart decisions, discipline concerns, grading, and more. Putting your care for your students first creates a learning community that inspires them to be their
best selves, both in school and out in the world. (p. 3)

Summary. We need to be available for our students and welcome them with a warm heart. We need to help them find success and praise them for it when they do find it. In the art studio we can celebrate each success, exhibit their work, and continue to believe in them. They must be reminded of the goodness of Christ, through our love, compassion, and example. By loving them unconditionally and leading them in their problem solving rather than solving their problems for them, they too will find the self-confidence to be a compassionate person. Furthermore, we can create and manage an a

The Creativity/Spirituality Link

Introduction. Through art, students can come to understand the deeper meanings of Christianity. Prescott in Bustard, (2000, p. 142) states that, Christian art is, “…work whose worldview or spirit is Christian.” Early works of art that exemplify Christ, his teaching, his influence and love help lead a student’s spiritual thinking. As we share spiritually based art work with our students it is important for us to help them understand the link between creativity and spirituality.

The Problem. In the art classroom we can motivate through demonstration, through other art forms such as drama, through role playing, through technology, through stories, through reflection, etc. It is the teacher’s responsibility to motivate his/her students, not the students’ responsibility to come to us with motivation. The more highly motivated the students are the greater will be their creativity and ultimately their ability to express their spirituality. But the art educator must understand the creativity/spirituality connection and help their students to understand it as well.

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The Solution. Even within the confines of public school regulations to separate Church and State, it is important to pursue the spirituality/creativity link. Spirituality is related to the feeling of awe when we see or hear something incredibly creative or beautiful. Or it may be in a moment while we are deeply into creating our own art work and we feel in touch with the Creator. Many artists such as Mozart and Matisse have referenced this connection while they are creating their work.

This sense of spirituality can be found in many art works, even those whose subject matter is not strictly religiously based. A case in point is the art work of Monet, particularly his landscapes. In his landscapes an aura of serenity is immediately evident and upon further study of the colors and the structures, spirituality comes forth. It is not unlike experiencing the Grand Tetons flooded in sunlight and the viewer being overwhelmed with the presence of God in that image. Or perhaps it is during that early morning walk in the winter, where the crisp air fills your lungs and the beauty of the first snow fall fills your heart. This image was so aptly captured by Claude Monet in 1869.
When the winter came Claude and Camille MONET moved to Étretat not far from Le Havre. Claude Monet painted the seaside but also the surrounding countryside. "I'm going to the countryside which is so beautiful here, which is perhaps even more pleasant in winter than in summer."

La Pie
The Magpie
Claude MONET 1869
Musée d'Orsay, Paris

Monet's painting demonstrates to most people that while appreciating and reflecting on the wintry image the viewer may find a sense of spirituality within it. It is however quite clear that the content of the painting is not of a typical religious origin. So we need to keep in mind that while there are many works of art that cause our spiritual response, feeling or reflection not all of those works are based on religious themes.

Or perhaps it is witnessing the birth of a child and his/her first breath and knowing that God has created the most amazing gift imaginable that evokes a strong spiritual connection and certainly for the Christian a strong religious connection. In art work we see this image of the Madonna and Child being the topic of hundreds or perhaps
even thousands or more artists over time, each creating their own visual interpretation. Doing a web search of “Madonna and Child” will affirm the infinite number of paintings and sculptures done on this topic. One such painting is by Fra Angelico, *Madonna and Child* which he painted in 1450. Fra Angelico, incidentally, painted dozens of images of the Madonna and Child, each possessing an essence of spirituality clearly evident to the Christian and non-Christian alike.

![Madonna and Child by Fran Angelico](image)

Few artists would deny that when deeply involved in their creativity there is an energy or spirituality between them and their art medium. This is also clearly seen observing students who are highly motivated and in the midst of an intense act of creating
an art work. This time of high motivation/creativity/spirituality appears to have
enveloped the students and taken him/her to another time/plane/place.

Beckett, (2006, p. 2) indicates that, “It (spirituality) is what we have in mind when
we call a work of art great: it is what makes the encounter with such a work a life-
enhancing moment.” In fact it is the great work of art that frees the human spirit,
encouraging reflection and the connection to spirituality and religion.

Dryness (2001) points out that,

Something of the loving goodness of God shines through our
experience of beauty. This is why we are inevitably moved to put
ourselves in the way of such experiences. We deeply long not only
for such beauty but, Christians believe, for relationship with the
personal presence lying beneath such beauty. As a result, the
experience of great beauty often moves unbelievers to seek God,
just as it often moves believers to praise, even to song or dance. (p.
142)

The link between creativity and spirituality is sometimes easier seen in young
children. Teachers like Cole, (1966) had a great ability to help students go deep down
inside to bring up feeling and meaning in an art work. She assured her students that when
this meaning came from inside, it would make their art work great. As evidence, we see
the love of a parent so clearly and expressively painted in a child’s work, the love of the
baby Jesus created of clay and lying in a manger, the love of classmates shown hand in
hand in a drawn portrait made by the young students, etc.

Summary. As art educators we have the additional opportunity to help our students
grow spiritually, if not religiously in the public school sector, through the creative experience. We can explain this through outstanding art works and we can draw this creativity from our students through the use of strong and exciting motivations. In the parochial school we can further connect the spirituality to Christianity. Romaine in Bustard, (2000, p. 159) reminds us that, “Creativity, like spirituality, is an intangible and mysterious quality that defines us as human.”

Conclusion

There is abundant literature that supports the relationships between creativity and spirituality, literature that describes Christian classroom methodologies and/or pedagogies, literature that reveals how to manage a classroom with compassion, and certainly the Holy Bible gives us the greatest examples of how to live a Christian life, setting a positive example for students.

By motivating and engaging students in content and asking, not just answering for them, the difficult but important questions about art, education, servitude, morality, etc. we help them to build their self-concept and self-esteem. They realize that their responses are important and that they can have a positive impact on the world. It also expresses to them the educator’s caring for them and respect of them.

In the art studio the educator spends considerable time with students and time that allows for interaction. Students appreciate and want the caring and love that the Christian art educator shows toward them. They come to understand that the caring and love is unconditional. Being available to them for mentoring as their need arises is also a valuable part of living the Christian example for them.
There are many ways that educators can demonstrate their compassion and spirituality to the students. It can occur almost continuously in the classroom. Are they greeted when entering the classroom? Are students coldly told what to do or are they warmly asked? Are students complimented and praised for their successes and good behavior or are they only ridiculed for their lack of ability or poor behavior? How does the educator ask difficult questions in ways in which even the least informed student can contribute a response? Does the educator model confrontational and angry behavior or model the behavior s/he desires the students to exhibit?

The spirituality/creativity link is especially evident in young children’s art and in that of great artists. Anyone who has been moved by such a work of art in a way that calls forth spirituality and the spirit of Christ can attest to this relationship. Similarly the artist, young or old, who has been motivated to express those spiritual feelings from deep down inside, understands that link to the creative experience.

It is the role and responsibility of the Christian art educator to ensure that pedagogy is delivered in a Christian manner, that s/he provides a Christian example, that s/he manage the classroom with compassion, and finally that the educator highly motivate the student to experience the creativity/spirituality relationship.

Men and women entering the art education profession need to know the powerful effects they can have on their students as their mentor and by leading learning in the art classroom. In the art classroom, based on the content of the student and historic work, there will be many opportunities to discuss spirituality, morality, creativity, and meaning in life with students. Other discussions and examples can lead students to their commitment to serve their church and community. The art educator, through these

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discussions will always have the opportunity to demonstrate compassion and the opportunity for reconciling individuals with God and with each other. Some of my most poignant memories are classroom discussions and in-depth discourses on artistic freedom, on religion, on servitude, on diversity, and our responsibilities for all peoples including those who live in poverty.

Educators such as Ernest Boyer, Robert MacKenzie, Barbara Stengel, Dryness and many others have written about their understanding of the importance of art, the need for the integrated curriculum, the creativity/spirituality link and the importance of community and social responsibility in education. Because of the impact of their mentoring on me, I take seriously my responsibility to be a Christian art education mentor for those who I have an opportunity to serve.

As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. (NIV, Ephesians 4:1-2).
References


MacKenzie, R. J. (2003). *Setting limits in the classroom: How to move beyond the dance* [Type text]


