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ADEL Participation/Reflection

I found it striking how often I've heard my own peers lament "I used to love a subject, but my teacher was terrible at it and ruined it for them." How often I heard that phrase being used in relation to student's elementary and high school art classes? I find striking how a single bad relationship with a teacher, and particularly how a teacher untrained in fine art (a sad fact in the majority of schools in Ontario) can squander the talents and passions of so many of their students.

Informed by my experiences as both a summer arts instructor, a study group leader, and now as an intern at the AGO, I've found some very curious differences between the theories and practical realities of teaching. The adage that "the best artists are the best teachers" rings more true for me now than ever, and my more aware than ever how teaching is an extension of an artist's practice. It's even potentially a part of our responsibility as artists to pass on the knowledge of its culture, history and production. However, I've found that a lesson plan that illuminates and instills a love of art is only half the battle.

Regardless of one's position on curriculum, collaborative learning is ultimately a social practice. Teaching is all about the building of relationships, which help both instructor and student, grow as individuals. This human element of attention to both the subject and the student is almost what I would call the difference between being an "educator" and a "teacher".

I've noted countless pedagogical decisions that pay attention to this fact. They may include the small, ubiquitous gestures of audio or visual cues to signal attention to the instructor, the emphasis on collaborative art making, the careful supervision of how students of various personalities both come together and come into conflict with each other. Other larger decisions include Catharine's creation of a round table discussion in a final critique of works, Shannon's "silent dodgeball" creativity challenges, and Soheila's use of material limitations to challenge students' creative abilities. In my own teaching, I've had to learn the skills of projecting my voice orally in a tone that's both approachable and authoritative. When in individual discussions with students about the art they make, I've learned that there are plenty of times when no teaching is the best kind of teaching. Some of my most valuable discoveries have come when I realized that the process of scaffolding questions during gallery tour is transferable when asking a student to think about their own work. I've spent quite a bit of time here learning to pull back the reins on my own excitement for an artwork, so as not to become prescriptive about what a student's work may be about or what it may evolve into. It's all an issue of having faith in one's students.

A favourite professor of mine once handed out a course outline to me that consisted of only two words: Trust Yourself. The course ended with me creating one of the most productive and developed bodies of work that I have ever produced, along with a very strong personal bond with this professor. One of my first journal entries talked about the power dynamics between student and teacher; I now realize that what I was really talking about was a balance of trust.