

**I** Traditional forms of teaching and learning based on textual forms of representation and rational thought may limit how we perceive our world. Artistic forms of expression and their implications for adult education are discussed.

## Knowledge Construction as Contested Terrain: Adult Learning Through Artistic Expression

*Randee Lipson Lawrence*

On a recent trip to Santa Fe, I took the opportunity to visit the Awakenings Museum. It features just one exhibit, an eleven-thousand-square-foot space covered floor to ceiling with the work of the French painter Jean-Claude Gauguin. The exhibit depicts Gauguin's spiritual connection to the life and influence of Jesus Christ. Although not a Christian, I was nevertheless deeply moved by the bold colors and powerful imagery. This artistic rendering affected me in a way that reading or hearing about Christian theology never could.

Artistic forms of expression extend the boundaries of how we come to know, by honoring multiple intelligences and indigenous knowledge. Artistic expression broadens cultural perspectives by allowing and honoring diverse ways of knowing and learning. Making space for creative expression in the adult education classroom and other learning communities helps learners uncover hidden knowledge that cannot easily be expressed in words. It opens up opportunities for adult learners to explore phenomena holistically, naturally, and creatively, thus deepening understanding of self and the world.

The term *art* as used throughout this chapter refers to all forms of artistic expression: poetry, drama, dance, literature, music, and all forms of visual art. The chapter considers both the aesthetics of art created by others and art created by students as part of the learning experience.

## **Limitations of Traditional Ways of Constructing Knowledge in Adult and Higher Education**

Cognitive knowing has dominated the adult education classroom, where the curriculum typically emphasizes transmission of knowledge through cultural reproduction (Greene, 1995). We prize reading, writing, and intellectual discourse. The intent of this chapter is not to suggest that these forms of teaching and learning are inherently wrong; they draw on only part of our human potential. Expression through spoken or written language can be a limitation (Lawrence and Mealman, 2001). When we open up intellectual space to incorporate other ways of knowing into our teaching practice, as expressed through metaphor, dance, poetry, visual art, or dramatic expression, we draw on the affective, somatic, and spiritual domains. Participants can more fully express what they know. Barone and Eisner (1997), pioneers in the area of arts-based research, agree that rationalist modes of inquiry have served to suppress artistic modes of expression. If we insist that people put their ideas into words, what gets communicated is often partial or not expressed at all (Lawrence and Mealman, 2001).

Many educators, particularly those in formal education settings, are reluctant to encourage artistic forms of expression in their classrooms because they are themselves unfamiliar, and thus uncomfortable, with the affective dimensions of knowledge production. The question of evaluation often comes up. How does one assess learning from a painting or musical composition? I have found that engaging students as partners in the evaluation process is an essential component in evaluating nonrational work.

As a final integrative project at the completion of her master's program in adult education, one of my students created a quilt. Though it was beautifully crafted, viewing the quilt alone did not give me enough insight into the student's learning process. But as we sat together and she explained how the panels, colors, and symbols represented the building blocks of her learning, I was able to more clearly see and assess her learning. Spoken language is not always necessary to understand art (indeed, it seems almost paradoxical), but discussion can sometimes assist educators in the evaluation process, enabling their students to make use of these creative forms of expressing knowledge.

London (1989) believes that human intelligence lies above and below the conscious level. To know, we need to value and acknowledge the unknown. Adopting this unknowing state of mind opens us up to more creative possibilities; "a state of Not Knowing allows us greater facility in re-arranging what we know into new configurations and definitions of reality" (p. 81). Artistic expression is a way of tapping into this unknown region.

### **Art as Indigenous Knowledge**

We often hear it expressed that art is a universal language. One need not understand Japanese to appreciate the delicate brush strokes of Japanese

watercolor. The bold colors of Diego Rivera speak to us whether our native language is Spanish, English, or Swahili. CD stores in the United States now have a category called world music, which includes native music from a variety of countries. Every culture and every tradition from earliest civilization to the present has created art, music, theater, poetry, and dance.

Eisner (1972) offered an “essentialist justification” (p. 2) for teaching art in schools. Although recognizing that art education serves to meet the needs of students and society, Eisner asserts that art is also indigenous unto itself. Art makes contributions to human society that are unique and cannot be duplicated by any other means. Art can also be a means to overcome the literacy barrier. McNeal (1997), who worked with an Inuit population in Western Canada, used films and tapes of cultural elders depicting indigenous history and culture to help reach her adult literacy students.

Our earliest ways of knowing are preverbal (Allen, 1995). Children naturally and spontaneously express themselves through singing, dancing, drawing, or acting out (pretending), often before they learn to read and write and sometimes even before they acquire a spoken language. At some point, this natural ability is thwarted. It may happen as we go to school and are told by the teacher that trees can't be blue, or that we must color inside the lines. We are told that our acting out is causing a disturbance. We are told that our singing voice is not in tune, so we stop singing. Our natural inclination can also be stifled by gender roles and expectations. When I was in the fourth grade and we had the opportunity to study a musical instrument in school, I was told that the saxophone was a “boy's instrument” and was encouraged to play the flute or violin. I did not join band that year, or ever. Is it any wonder then that by the time learners reach adulthood they are often reluctant to participate in artistic types of activity? As London (1989) expresses it, we have turned away from our natural ability to create as we learned to become embarrassed: “We have learned to feel so inept and disenfranchised from our own visual expressions that we simply cease doing it altogether” (p. xiii). Yet, as the chapters in this volume show, artistic expression is often the very medium that enables adult learning to occur.

### **Learning from Diverse Cultural Perspectives Through Art**

As we recognize and appreciate that art is indigenous to all cultures, we can view it as a means to learn about diverse cultures and cultural perspectives. This understanding can assist us in helping our diverse learners get to know one another (see Lems in Chapter Two of this volume). We can also use the arts as a way to promote understanding of cultural perspectives that are not present within the learning group. We are all constrained by our positionality to a certain extent. We view the world through our race, gender, class, and ethnic identities.

Greene (1995) used the literature of African American and other women to present multiple realities, thus allowing learners to see the world through many lenses. Rather than relying on the history books to teach about slavery, she used fictional literature such as Toni Morrison's *Beloved* to allow her learners to consider history from the perspective of other's experiences. Similarly, Eisner (1995) stated that "artistically crafted work also has the capacity to put us in the shoes of those we do not know" (p. 2). This level of understanding can create a sense of empathy, which opens us up to even greater learning. As we come to know and care about individuals, we are more open to learning from and about them. Allen (1995) believes that images provide a means to communicate on a deeper level than words. These images can help us more readily transcend cultural boundaries.

Clover (2000), who studied community arts in the context of adult environmental education, found that art could be a way of overcoming socioeconomic as well as cultural barriers, as people who did not ordinarily move in the same circles came together to work on projects.

Opening ourselves to the potential of learning through cultural difference requires that we honor and respect diverse ways of learning, knowing, and expressing that knowledge. If we truly value our students and honor the fullness of who they are culturally and individually, we need to create opportunities for multiple modes of expression. If we accept only written or linguistic forms of expression and try to convert our students to these ways of knowing, we devalue who they are or who they may become (Lawrence and Mealman, 2001). By insisting that people speak our language rather than finding a common mode of communication such as through art, we do violence to them.

### **Knowing Self Through Art**

Allen (1995) says that *art is a way of knowing*. We can come to know love, fear, work, patterns, and transformation through art. Most important, we can come to know ourselves. For Allen, this knowing comes from the creation of visual images through painting, drawing, or sculpture. The images come to us from our physical surroundings, our memories of past experience, our imagination, and our dreams. According to Dirx (2001), it is important to pay attention to the emotional aspects of our learning process. Awareness of our emotional state comes to us in the form of images. These images help us connect our inner self with the outer world, which is what Dirx refers to as "soul work" (2001, p. 69). Images can be expressed through various forms of art. Creation of art helps us make sense of self and the world in which we live.

In my adult learning classes, I sometimes ask the students (mean age forty) to draw images of themselves at different decades of their lives. The images and symbols that emerge are often indicative of their particular life tasks and help them understand their developmental processes. This level

of self-knowledge is not limited to visual art. Knowing occurs through writing music, poetry, or prose, or through dance and theatrical expression. This knowledge can also occur through experiencing art created by others, as in listening to music, looking at photographs, or watching a play, particularly in the context of a class or adult learning group. The group can discuss the work from multiple perspectives and interpretations, thus taking advantage of the collaborative synergy and social construction of knowledge (Lawrence, 1996).

Eisner (1995) believes that experiencing art created by others can “create a paradox of revealing what is universal by examining what is particular” (p. 3). As we encounter fictional characters in literature or drama, we often recognize ourselves and others. A good example is the film *Educating Rita*, which has often been used with groups of returning adult learners. Women and men of all races and cultures typically identify with Rita, a young English beautician who decides to take classes at the Open University.

McNeal (1997) and her colleagues (white Canadians) found that including art in the curriculum was helpful in teaching across borders when they accepted an assignment north of the Arctic Circle with Inuit college students. They discovered that art was a way to connect people to their own history and culture. The arts program not only assisted the students in developing knowledge of self and culture; the teachers were enlightened as well.

### **Accessing or Uncovering Hidden Knowledge**

The first time I bring crayons, colored markers, and sheets of newsprint into my graduate adult education classes, the students look at me in disbelief (“You want me to do what?” “Is this graduate school or kindergarten?”). Once they overcome their initial hesitancy and begin to draw, they are surprised to discover that they have tapped into a source of knowledge that was always present but veiled or hidden. Artistic expression allowed them to access this knowledge in ways that writing did not. Art draws on a source of wisdom within each of us that does not exist anywhere else (London, 1989). London believes that creating art can also be a means to uncover or reveal our original primal self: “There is an immediate sense of recognition, often accompanied by sorrow, later to be followed by quiet, but deep joy” (p. 44).

Greene (1995) argues in favor of including all forms of art in the school curriculum because of their great power to “release the imagination” (p. 27), which allows us to see the unseen. Art not only engages us at an intellectual level; it evokes feelings, intuitions, and even bodily sensations. Paying attention to these modes of experiencing can result in deeper knowledge.

Certain works of art, particularly those of the surrealists (notably René Magritte and Marcel Duchamp), recontextualize the familiar (Eisner, 1995). They force us to view familiar objects in new ways. In this sense we are not passive consumers of art; we are co-creators of an interpretive

process. Art engages all of our senses, awakening our imaginative and intellectual capabilities.

### **Image Making as a Way to Deepen Understanding**

As this chapter has attempted to point out, experiencing art that was created by others helps us see anew. Creating our own art calls on more of our own abilities to make sense of the world holistically. Willis (2002) exemplified both processes in his phenomenological study of adult education in aboriginal Australia. He used poetic expression to make sense of his data, thus gaining more insight into the experience of the phenomena. By creating a gallery of panels displaying his poetry, he made it possible for others to experience his research findings in a way that engaged them as co-interpreters in a meaning-making process.

Greene (1995) believes that art has a critical role in this process of meaning making: “It is difficult for me to teach educational history or philosophy to teachers-to-be without engaging them in the domain of imagination and metaphor. How else are they to make meaning out of the discrepant things they learn? How else are they to see themselves as practitioners, working to choose, working to teach in an often indecipherable world?” (p. 99)

Allen (1995) found that creating artistic images was a way to come to a deeper understanding of many of life’s challenges, among them grief, fear, and the unknown. London (1989) believes that when we look at art or experience it we see it directly, firsthand, with “original eyes.” This is especially true when we listen to a song or look at a photograph or painting of a significant event, as in my experience at the Awakenings Museum. We come to a deeper understanding than if we read about the event or hear about it from another source: “Seeing the thing directly is having an experience with all the complexity of thoughts and feelings and somatic reactions that accompany all experiences” (London, 1989, p. 53).

### **Learning Through the Arts**

The arts are an ideal complement to the rational discourse that dominates most of academe. Although many academicians recognize the value of a fine arts curriculum in itself, there is little written that addresses using artistic expression in mainstream adult and higher education. I surmise that the paucity of literature is because we are not incorporating the arts into our practice to any great degree.

As previously stated, there is often a great deal of discomfort when adults are asked to draw, paint, or present a dramatic skit. My students often feel the need to preface sharing of their artwork by telling the group, “I’m not an artist”—those are the ones who are brave enough to attempt the activity at all. I suspect many educators also feel this discomfort. They avoid

artistic expression because it raises the specter of learned childhood responses to being judged and evaluated by the quality of their art. It is much safer to stick to known pedagogical processes. As London (1989) suggests, we need to rid ourselves of these judgments about what is good and bad art in order to free our creative abilities. It is the process of creating art, not the product, that is most important. The process is where the learning takes place. Clover (2000) found this process element to be especially true in using art with adults working on community projects. The learning was in the collective process of creating, planning, and reflecting.

Cassou and Cubley (1995) teach painting as a spontaneous process without thought to the product or outcome. They pose questions such as: "What would I do if I painted something that didn't have to make sense?" (p. 100) and "What would I paint if no one were going to see it?" (p. 34) They make it safe for their learners by encouraging them to let go of the inner critic and focus on the process. Letting go of this self-judgment or fear of judgment by others is an important first step for people engaging in artistic work. Once we allow the creativity to flow through us, we become agents in our own learning process (Greene, 1995). Learning becomes an active process rather than a passive one.

### **Art in the Curriculum**

Eisner (1972), a pioneer in the field of arts-based education, informs us that knowing how people learn in art helps us know how to teach them. I would take that one step further. To create educational experiences through art, one must value art for its learning potential. Greene (1995) believes that incorporating arts into the curriculum leads to a "deepening and expanding mode of tuning in" (p. 104).

The chapters in this volume exemplify many ways in which educators of adults have incorporated various art forms into their teaching practice. A single art form can significantly enhance the curriculum, but a combination of arts can have dramatic results. Mullen (1999) and her colleagues developed an arts-based educational program for incarcerated women that blended visual art, movement, and writing into a health-and-wellness course. Collaboration among the inmates was facilitated as women wrote or created a visual expression of their experience. They created performances based on one another's writing. They wrote about each other's artwork. Outcomes of the program included personal and cultural awareness as well as communal expression.

Art forms used in combination also allow individual preferences and creativity to emerge. In a class on life history, I played flute music by Douglas Spotted Eagle, inviting students to reflect on significant life transition through visual art, writing, or movement. Some wrote poetry or prose, some drew pictures; one person created a collage, and another got up and performed a dance.

## Art as a Means for Social Change

The arts, though not necessarily represented in mainstream literature, have frequently been a part of adult education in the context of social change. The most noted examples are popular theater, or “theater of the oppressed,” which was developed by Augusto Boal (1995) in the tradition of Paulo Freire to empower people to solve their own problems. Two excellent examples of theater as a means for social change can be found in this volume. Donoho (Chapter Seven) describes an urban community performance project in the city of Chicago, while Noble (Chapter Five) discusses his work in theater with the mentally ill in western Canada.

Kamler (2001) combined theatrical performance with writing and video production in her work with women over the age of seventy. They wrote and performed stories of aging to educate the community beyond the cultural stereotypes typically held about the elderly.

Clover (2000) believes that art can be a means to increase community awareness of environmental issues, thus creating a catalyst for change. She describes a case study where artists, environmentalists, and sanitation workers came together to deal with the problem of waste management in the city of Toronto. They painted images on garbage trucks to raise community awareness about the problem. One benefit to the project was that disparate groups of people who lived in the same community but did not talk with one another came together to work on a common goal. Art was the universal language that allowed them to communicate, overcoming stereotypes to work for a common cause.

## Implications for Adult Education

Incorporating various art forms—poetry, drama, music, literature, visual art, and others—into the practice of adult education provides tremendous potential to enhance both teaching and learning. For these learning opportunities to occur, educators need to take risks by venturing out of their comfort zone and in turn encouraging their students to take similar risks. The payoff for such risk taking is that more of our human potential is activated as we continue to learn how to learn.

## References

- Allen, P. B. *Art Is a Way of Knowing*. Boston: Shambhala, 1995.
- Barone, T. E., and Eisner, E. “Arts-Based Educational Research.” In R. M. Jaeger (ed.), *Complementary Methods for Research in Education*. Washington, D.C.: American Educational Research Association, 1997.
- Boal, A. *The Rainbow of Desire: The Boal Method of Theatre and Therapy*. New York: Routledge, 1995.
- Cassou, M., and Cubley, S. *Life, Paint and Passion*. New York: Tarcher/Putnam, 1995.
- Clover, D. E. “Community Arts as Environmental Education and Activism: A Labour and Environment Case Study.” *Convergence*, 2000, 33(4), 19–30.

- Dirkx, J. M. "The Power of Feelings: Emotion, Imagination, and the Construction of Meaning in Adult Learning." In S. B. Merriam (ed.), *The New Update on Adult Learning Theory*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2001.
- Eisner, E. *Educating Artistic Vision*. New York: Macmillan, 1972.
- Eisner, E. W. "What Artistically Crafted Research Can Help Us Understand about Schools." *Educational Theory*, 1995, 45(1), 1–6.
- Greene, M. *Releasing the Imagination*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1995.
- Kamler, B. "We're Not Nice Little Old Ladies." *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy*, 2001, 45(3), 232–35.
- Lawrence, R. L. "Co-Learning Communities: A Hermeneutic Account of Adult Learning in Higher Education Through the Lived World of Cohorts." Dissertation, Northern Illinois University, 1996.
- Lawrence, R. L., and Mealman, C. A. "The Researcher as Artist: Creating Pathways for Acquisition and Expression of Knowledge." Paper presented at the twentieth annual Midwest Research-to-Practice Conference in Adult, Continuing, and Community Education, Charleston, Illinois, Oct. 2001.
- London, P. *No More Secondhand Art: Awakening the Artist Within*. Boston: Shambhala, 1989.
- McNeal, J. "DBAE in an Arctic Fine Arts Program for Indigenous Canadian College Students." *Visual Arts Research*, 1997, 23(2), 71–82.
- Mullen, C. A. "Reaching Inside Out: Arts-Based Educational Programming for Incarcerated Women." *Studies in Art Education*, 1999, 40(2), 143–161.
- Willis, P. "Risky Journeys: Using Expressive Research to Portray Cross-Cultural Adult Educational Practice in Aboriginal Australia." (CD-ROM.) *Alberta Journal of Educational Research*, 2002, 48(3).

*Randee Lipson Lawrence is an associate professor in the department of Adult, Continuing, and Literacy Education at National-Louis University.*