



A TEACHER'S REFLECTIONS ON ARTISTIC INTELLIGENCE

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Artistic: *Appreciative of or sensitive to art or beauty*

Art: *Human effort to imitate, supplement, alter, or counteract the work of nature*

Creative: *Characterized by originality and expressiveness; imaginative*

Intelligence: *The capacity to acquire and apply knowledge; the faculty of thought and reason*

The American Heritage Dictionary offers the above comments about artistic intelligence. The cliché of the times, “out of the box,” suggests added insight—thinking in pathways not often traveled, putting ideas together without following traditional directions, exploring the unknown on friendly terms. Then I read *The Creative Brain* (2006) by Dr. Nancy C. Andreasen. In print I finally discovered the thinking and research that the teacher in me had been searching for. Testing for artistic intelligence has been non-existent. Yet we talk about the genius of Leonardo da Vinci, Albert Einstein, and others as if they had taken an IQ test at age twelve. The other part of the equation is that most of what we label genius and the thinking of these people expressed in their writings reflects artistic activity at some rather deep levels of appreciation. Using Keats’s

language, Andreasen asks the important questions: “Why do our brains yearn for beauty and truth, as if they are all we know on Earth and all we need to know? Why are some human beings so highly creative that we recognize them as true geniuses? Can those who are less creative enhance this innate human creative capacity in ourselves and others?” (*The Creative Brain*, p.4) Her research as a neuroscientist has finally begun to unlock the mystery of the creative brain.

Using the various methods and machines to measure brain activity and doing very careful research on geniuses of the past, Andreasen has presented today’s readers with insights into the nature of creativity in the brain and in the environment that stimulates artistic development. Though Howard Gardner states in *Intelligence Reframed* (1999) that no artistic intelligence exists but that intelligences function artistically, the teacher still faces the student who has left the box and is traveling down non-traditional paths. Support to guide these students to use that intelligence wisely is quite non-existent. As I think back about the students I have had the privilege of teaching, I realize the importance of the teacher as the stimulus in the development and encouragement of artistic intelligence. The following reflections will speak to this realization. Please note that the names of the students have been changed.

“May I do an interpretation of *Titus Andronicus*?” The paper put on my desk the next day continues to make me appreciate Joel’s artistic intelligence eighteen years later. The Epilogue of his two page somewhat satiric dialogue between Title and Bearer still rings true.

“A Title demands revenge on enemies within. They will serve as their own meat for horrific deeds done to men and women of virtue. If the Title’s humility is not recognized, however, the Bearer shall also feed on sorrow.”

Joel is now a public servant in a Senator’s office in Washington, D.C. We have often talked about his appreciation of Shakespeare’s very early play. Someday he says that he may publish his notes on his days in Washington. What I have read fits all

the above definitions. He sent me one journal entry that described the person he would like to see as president—“the eyes of Lincoln to pierce the darkness of the enemy, the brain of Jefferson to see the multiplicity of ways to do international negotiations, and the plainness of Truman to make sure the work is done right and on time.”

“In the spirit of Socrates, carry on, Mary,” whispered a wise colleague during a very boring faculty meeting. I was attempting to grade papers and stay awake. Carol smiled at me. Both of us were writing commentary—she on watercolor assignments of her art students; I on “poems” of my creative writing students. Then we made an observation. We shared most of the students. We found ourselves attaching poems to watercolor expressions and magically we and the students began to see the result as “ART” and not dull assignments. The work these students and several of their friends produced during the rest of the semester took on a depth and a sincerity rarely seen in teenage art. The final art show received rave reviews from the normally jaded critics from the local galleries. Five of those students have made significant contributions in their advertising, interior design, and industrial graphics careers. I still receive a poem or two from them on occasion. Each commented that the synergy of writing and painting made them aware that art connected them to the world of learning! The second pleasure was creating an underground team with Carol to work with students more interested in the arts and being “connected” than in busy work of dates and numbers. Our team lasted five years and taught me how art in any of its forms is the source of philosophy, mathematics, history, science, language. Language itself is the most human creative action of all.

“Yes, I know you like working with your hands. Being an aeronautical engineer, however, is the last choice you should have on your list. History is your first love.” Lawrence listened and nodded his head in agreement. How often, though, had he heard from parents that he must choose engineering. Then he could at least “get a job.” He did—and used his salary to put himself through a PhD program in history. Today, Lawrence is

poised to teach at a major university and has published. His dissertation on Guadalcanal, which he personally visited to do his research, is resting on a beautiful white oak mission bookcase that he built for me just last year. He does exquisite wood-working as a hobby. He is also an accomplished musician and can change the oil on his 1976 truck, which he restored. It is a pleasure to be entertained in his home as the colors and furniture create a setting that encourages good conversation. The phrase Renaissance man comes to mind.

“I’m bright; you can’t teach me anything. I know it all.” Melinda really posed a problem. Bright she thought she was. Gifted she did not realize at fifteen. Her wonderfully gentle satire she took for granted, thinking “bright” was measured in grades. Finally convincing her to write as she spoke, she began to understand her own deep introspections and possibilities. Her graduation made me very sad as I would never again read such wisely funny responses to my required assignments. Today she crosses oceans on tours, acting, writing, and occasionally directing major comedy shows. She also is very involved in humanitarian causes and reminds me regularly to stay active and awake! She will never let me grow old or grow up!

The assignment: Write a composition discussing the major characteristics of Beowulf and compare them to a modern hero of your choice. Steve asked if he could present his composition to the class. I innocently said, “Of course,” thinking he wanted to read his essay, something I encouraged students to do. To my amazement, on the day the assignment was due, Steve walked into the room with three of his band friends, brass instruments shining, and preformed his original composition, *Fanfare to Beowulf*. He incorporated motifs from movies and TV series for his modern hero and created original ones for Beowulf. Thus began his music career that includes teaching high school students and composing. His ability to synthesize the concept of written and musical expression into a meaningful form that spoke to both structures at age seventeen demonstrates artistic intelligence to me. He may never write a symphony that stirs one like Mozart. He is, however, cre-

ating an exciting environment for his students that encourages them to mix and match music and their academic studies.

Does artistic intelligence apply to math students? In Jon's case, the answer is yes. When asked in World Literature to write a poem that expressed a personal interest, his response was one that incorporated mathematical terms in praise of Einstein, Pythagoras, and Euclid. A part of that poem still is in my notes. ". . . c^2 dances between a^2 and b^2 / The ballet master instructs / The future and we / Build graceful forms / of Pythagorean beauty . . ." Jon also made it clear to me that if the first sentence of a novel did not reflect the theme or purpose of the whole book, the author was not worth reading. We had many discussions about this idea. His ability to parse the first sentence for its philosophy, lexicography, and grammar would leave many a professor gasping for breath and longing to have him for a student. Unfortunately, a series of surgeries, severe mental issues, and an accident have prevented him from continuing his formal schooling. He still continues to educate himself about languages and math. I hope he will be able to share his insights with the world someday. His classmates still talk about the doors of thinking he opened for them and his contributions to their education. His comment to me at graduation was thanking me and the other teachers for letting him think in class in high school. He had not been allowed to do so before.

Benjamin simply could not write. His name appeared at the top of many nearly blank sheets of paper. His comparison essay follows:

"Apples and oranges. They are different colors and sizes.
I like them both. The end."

This essay from a sixteen year old in a College Prep Junior Composition class shocked even me who was rather beyond being surprised by what teenagers could turn in. He could verbally tell me more in a very organized fashion but still only at the information level. His parents were both college professors and at the end of their wits with what to do with Ben. Test after

test had indicated no major mental, intellectual, or emotional problem. Ben simply reported to me that he loved to read, liked words, but holding a pen or pencil was like touching fire to him. The band director then stepped in. Ben would have to drop band if he did not better his grades in English and American History, both classes that demanded writing. Ben was the most talented clarinetist that had ever set foot in a high school band program anywhere. The director wanted to keep him in band and in high school. I asked Ben, "Could you bring your clarinet to a tutorial session after school?" His face lit up like the space shuttle blasting off for orbit. Our tutorial session went something like this: "Play how an apple tastes to you." "The same with how an orange tastes to you." In music he could do what he refused to do in writing. With me taking notes and introducing him to a rather sophisticated vocabulary by working with a traditional Roget's *Thesaurus*, he was able to see his music in words and learned to write well enough to make it through college. He plays in a number of different jazz groups and composes for them. He shines as a teacher of reed instruments. I like to think it is because he had a teacher who cared enough about his artistic intelligence. He tells me it is simply because I like jazz!

I learned a bit of music theory and deeply appreciate a well-performed symphony. I was not prepared for the joy I heard coming from a not well tuned piano in the choir room after school one day. A student played Chopin's *Etudes* as if she were at Carnegie Hall. Oblivious to my presence, I noticed tears running down her cheeks. She finished and ran to the door where she collapsed sobbing under her very long hair as if she had broken all the world's crystal. Thinking a beloved grandparent might have passed, I finally was able to comfort her enough to hear her say she did not want to go to another piano lesson! She did not go to that piano lesson; she never made it to Carnegie Hall as her parents had planned. Today she leads a major non-profit organization and raises over one million a year for its endowment fund. Her musical gift is not wasted as she does practice and will play for friends she invites

to her home. Her real joy and music is seeing broken families healed, and she has the innate ability to do just that. At the young age of 14, she knew that her artistic intelligence was not music but service. She had ideas about how to heal humanity that came like composition did to Mozart in her alone time and she knew not from where or how (*Creative Brain*, p.76).

The guitar made every teen a rock star. Rhaul quietly did well in all his classes and played his guitar in the hall, in the music room, in classes with permission, in friend's cars, anywhere he could. Did the music give him release, inspiration, passion for learning, or all of the above? He did not want to be a rock star. He did want to be in a gifted and talented program. As the school did not have one, he decided to make it have one and he would be its first participant. He continued to play his guitar. His essays always went a different way than expected. He decided Shakespeare was really a doctor and went through the plays finding proof of his knowledge of medicine, which would have been what a real doctor of the time would have known and not just the average writer. Rhaul must have the best example of what Andreasen calls brain plasticity. Today he is brain surgeon and plays in a jazz orchestra. He often told me, "If I do not play for at least thirty minutes before I go to the operating room, I will not go. The music tells me what to do. It always has."

The lines in the margin faintly suggested a finger print pattern. On the next paper in looked like two finger prints talking to each other. The next assignment had very small vein-like designs that reminded me of flower petals, maybe roses. Then an in-class essay exam had even fainter lines which I realized were strands of hair that replicated the hairdo in front of the student. Alice finally confessed to wanting to draw, to explore the minutiae of the world. "If that is your passion, go for it," I encouraged. The drawings continued with a delightful playfulness. When Alice graduated, she gave me a sheet of paper of her favorite marginal drawings. We laughed, and I asked what she would major in at university. "English," she replied. I thanked her for the compliment and decided I

needed to keep in touch with her. Five years and three or four major changes later, she graduated magna cum laude with a degree in forensics. She is presently finishing her Masters. As she also speaks five languages, she plans on working in international criminal investigations. Though the profession lost an English teacher, the world has gained a very artistic and ethical investigator. She was pleased that a teacher appreciated her scribbles and encouraged her rather than telling her not to make such drawings as other teachers had done.

“Lakes, Michigan and Wisconsin have enough lakes. Why build more?” Understanding the future need of lakefront property long before the realtors did was Andrew’s claim to fame. Build lakes he did, and to this day people think they were always there. I did not have Andrew as a student. My father was his mentor. Andrew could just look over a topographical map and see “just where God would put a lake if He had not been so busy making oceans.” Educated as a civil engineer, Andrew thrived only when he was creating more shoreline. Artistic intelligence, human effort to alter the work of nature, only to make more nature describes Andrew’s idea of on natural engineering. He, too, fits Andreasen’s concept of Mozart’s alone time. Often I would find him in the deepest thought; he would not even know I was present and asking him a question. Many years later I still enjoy the beauty he created and the inspiration he gave me to follow my passion. If artistic intelligence is able to be tested in the future, I am sure Andrew’s score would be among the highest.

“Finance is art,” Willson argued. Actually, sleeping had been his art in high school. Between “naps” he participated in class discussions, wrote solid papers, and played a good game of football. I am convinced his naps were and are his inspiration time. He always trumped his classmates with either the best argument or most insightful answer in any class discussion. With a Masters in Business and a Bachelors in Economics, Willson has set up his own financial consulting and investment company. His art is two-fold. One, he wants to see how diverse he can make portfolios that enrich his clients’ invest-

ments. Two, he wants his clients to see that he enjoys what he does—educating his clients about investing and financial freedom. “I’m not in the business to just collect commissions; I am creating art—investment portfolios that give my clients financial freedom just like a painting or a symphony gives emotional freedom.” Sensitive to beauty, the beauty of a one of a kind portfolio with Willson’s signature, is artistic intelligence. Having fired a dozen financial advisors, I appreciate Willson’s artistic intelligence in finance. I have talked to several financial people about Willson. They look at me with questioning expressions. When they realize he is only thirty and already has enough clients that he could “retire” and live off the commissions that he has not sought, they wonder about their own ethics and passion for the field. Willson will continue to play with the unusual and creative markets as Michelangelo did with creative mediums. At the same time he is a champion water skier, creates games on the spot for his cousins to play, can visually, and then physically, pack a moving van or a suitcase as if he were building a cathedral or creating a work of art for a museum. Everything fits and looks like a work of art when in its proper place. He reminds me frequently that if I had not let him sleep in class, he would not have succeeded in school. Whether that is true is not the point. What I did recognize is a very perceptive brain on overdrive. That it is now in charge of my finances makes life much easier for me! Finance is art and it takes artistic intelligence to understand it in terms other than dollars and cents.

At the end of these reflections, I am again convinced that the most important category of intelligence is the artistic/creative. We as educators have to be careful of words like bright, genius, high IQ. We have to even be more on our guard about scores on standardized tests and teaching to these tests. We need more Nancy Andereasens researching in the mainstream of educational thought to encourage creative intelligence that allows young students to reach for the stars. Much of what is passed off as education today does not even allow students to know stars exist. A standardized score dominates

rather than the Socratic question, “ why.” With more understanding of the brain’s creative activity and the plasticity of brain to respond to different creative stimuli, teachers may be able to lead curriculum programs that are “out of the box” and put the standardized test to the side. We can enhance the innate creative ability of our students. We may have again a Renaissance of Creative Thinking. Students will play with mud and make bricks to build their dreams, play with letters to be the next Shakespeare, dance with numbers and create new theories. That most of my teaching years were spent delivering non-traditional curriculum simply because I did not like the traditional now makes sense. Thank you students for letting me see your artistic intelligence blossom.