

# ART, ARTISTS & TEACHING

Summary from the symposium  
hosted by Bennington College and the J. Paul Getty Trust at

Bennington College, Vermont

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These few pages distill four days of intense conversations among two dozen people at a symposium jointly hosted by the J. Paul Getty Trust and Bennington College. “Art, Artists & Teaching” brought together leaders in the fields of art and education to explore new ways to infuse the creative impulses of the arts and artists into education in America, positing new models of teaching and learning. By self-imposed constraints to keep the conversation on a small scale initially, participants were invited to share their own perspectives, without the organizers’ attempting to achieve a specific representation of the arts education field. Bennington’s special history as an institution of higher education dedicated to an artistic and holistic approach for individual development led to its partnership with the Getty Trust for this conversation about the formation of artists and their role in education. After an evening’s gathering, three days followed during which Bennington faculty in a variety of disciplines—dance, ceramics, biology, music, sculpture, and mediation—presented their pedagogical approaches, and participants then discussed.

This report briefly summarizes the major topics and directions that inspired the participants during their time together at Bennington College. Some suggested that the outcome should be a “manifesto” to help face the present and future challenges of an educational system that falls short of developing the creative potential of individuals to meet contemporary social and economic challenge. It is hoped that this brief report will generate discussions on both the national and local levels, stimulate partnerships, and create incentives to explore the roles of artists as teachers.

## The Role of Art in the Global Learning Community

The arts occupy a low rung on the ladder of educational priorities. Considered interesting but not useful by industrialized societies, whose educational systems are designed for 19th century economic models, the arts have traditionally received the crumbs of educational funding and time in the school day. Too often, they are viewed as something peripheral to concerns to the “true” substance of education. Ironically, the business community clamors for creative people, seen as the competitive key to innovating in a globalized economy; but the educational system continues to put greater importance on mathematics, science, and other “hardcore” disciplines, which are seen as more “useful.”

“**O**ne of the problems in our educational system is that we’ve submitted to stereotypes. Artists are thought to be ‘creative,’ concerned with feelings and values; scientists to be objective and bloodless and focused only on facts. This is a terrible caricature. One of the steps we might take for the future is to recognize a coming together of the arts and sciences and technology, and to use those connections to enrich educational development. Outside the school system, these relationships are abundant. The more we can see ourselves in the arts as part of a broader intellectual movement, the more chance we have to make change inside education.”

**Ken Robinson, J. Paul Getty Trust**

The arts help to promote both the creative abilities and cultural literacy that are critical to developing fully engaged citizens in the global society.

## The Artist's Approach to Teaching

The model of intellectual seriousness over the past hundred years has raised “the expert” onto the highest pedestal of intelligence. When this model is used in teaching, the teacher, by necessity, is the source of all-important knowledge, and the student is the recipient. This is an extremely limited model when the aim is to engage and increase the capacities of students.

“**W**hen making is an essential activity of the classroom, the activity of students is absolutely fundamental. No longer is the work of a classroom completely governed by the teacher’s actions and decisions; the student increasingly must assume responsibility for what is happening. When you make something, it is your choices at work, not someone else’s. It is difficult to overstate the importance of these dimensions of a classroom: who is being active in the learning process and who is accountable. A model that will allow education to be the powerhouse it can be needs to place that activity and that accountability in both the teacher and the student. ”

**Elizabeth Coleman**, *Bennington College President*

“**T**o be involved in the wonder of it is primary; the teacher, the artist needs to be so involved with curiosity. And then working with students, you have to understand that they are going to do something else, they’re not going to do what you do. And I’m always wondering what next to do and how to do it...”

**Dana Reitz**, *Bennington Faculty, Dance*

Artists teach not only by the act of making. To learn “making” requires creativity on a highly personal level, and learning to be creative requires learning to be observant, “learning to attend.”

“**I**’ve taught several courses that have some kind of experimental quality to them, and my guiding principle is that my role is to get students to pay attention to something. That is the word I would like to introduce into the dialogue: the idea of attention. I don’t think it’s a small thing to get students to take a look at something—just about anything, really—because it leads to the ability to focus and to absorb. I have come to the strange conclusion that one thing my students should do is sit with me and listen to music. The question I’m sometimes asked is: ‘What am I supposed to get from this?’ Well, I don’t know what you’re supposed to get from it; it’s Mozart’s symphony. You’re supposed to *attend* to it.”

**Allen Shawn**, *Bennington Faculty, Music*

Learning art requires attention. So does learning science. The artist as teacher and the scientist as teacher both strive to get their students to observe, to attend, to take responsibility, and to make or create. The process is fundamentally similar—but the educational system attaches different value judgments to science and art as intellectual pursuits.

“**T**he arts are absolutely essential to the human spirit. Do we need to know how old art is in human endeavors? There’s a new cave found in southern France—35,000 years old—and there’s an extraordinary cave painting there. The caves most of us knew about were only 20,000 years old, so that’s another 15,000 years of human history in which art was a way of making sense of our world and our place in it. And musical instruments from the Ice Age—20,000 years ago—had to have been a scientific as well as an aesthetic endeavor.”

**Betsy Sherman, *Bennington Faculty, Biology***

Over and over the artists on the faculty of Bennington College shared their philosophies of teaching, and each one stressed how intertwined the act of learning is with the act of “making” and taking responsibility for one’s learning, for one’s creativity. Learning from experiences and learning to create flow along a continuum.

“**H**ow do you get to 18-year-old students? How do you make something a first-hand experience to them? I can’t let everyone have the experiences I’ve had. It’s not a hand-me-down. It’s somehow providing that *first-hand experience* that the students can discover themselves.”

**Jon Isherwood**, *Bennington Faculty, Sculpture*

To talk about the artist’s role in teaching is to talk about a pedagogy that encourages making, attending, problem solving, taking responsibility, and experiencing—hardly revolutionary concepts in themselves, but perhaps revolutionary in articulating the case for teaching art as fundamental—even critical—to developing a healthy and creative post-industrial society.

## Building on the Bennington Conversation

“None of us can make good policy without being clear about what our practice is, and what we’re trying to distill from that practice to create policy. So you stand firmly on the ground of practice and you reach toward policy. But underneath you is also this river of inquiry; without it we stagnate, in our practice and in our policy.”

**Jill Tarule**, *College of Education and  
Social Sciences, University of Vermont*

What did we hope to take away from this conversation? What would be actions that these two-dozen critical thinkers on art and education might help to influence more broadly? The hope to advocate “ideas that matter” took shape in a three-part strategy for potential next steps: policy, practice, and inquiry or research. Strong linkages among these three areas will reinforce the role of artists in education by influencing public support and awareness, by letting good examples shine widely for celebration and emulation, and by pointing out new areas for research and evaluation.

### Policy: Influencing Decision-Making and Advocating Public Support of the Arts

Rather than isolate the arts in the larger educational ecosystem, public policy must embrace the arts as part of the solution to improving educational quality and outcomes involving artists and teaching. A curriculum enriched by working with artists also puts a human face on the arts, and opens up new ways of leveraging educators’ time and resources. Public policy has most recently focused on the inadequacy of teacher training.

Educators feel burdened with a growing list of subjects they must master and work into an overloaded teaching day. By inviting artists to share a role in the educational setting, policy goals can be fulfilled, while partnerships between the artist and the educator bring different but complementary areas of expertise to the classroom.

Artists are primary advocates of the authentic experience of creating/making and experiencing. What is needed is a fundamental change in the understanding of what artists can bring to education—as well as what gifts they receive from that role. In their formation as artists, creative people are not commonly trained to communicate their process of “making” in a classroom. They cannot be expected to work in the school setting intuitively.

Policymakers are interested in solutions, not problems. Advocates for the arts in education need to focus on the policy solutions and improvements the arts can bring to a creative society, on both the local and global levels.

Networks should build outward from meetings such as this to articulate the need for artists in teaching and reach broader audiences in the public forum. Critical steps will include developing communications strategies, coalitions, and new audiences that perceive strong and positive connections between the role of artists, the arts in education, and teaching. If the ideas that emerge from this gathering at Bennington could be labeled a “manifesto,” then “expressing the manifesto” should become the public obligation of not only the participants but also of a broader constituency concerned with the arts in education.

## Good Practices, Good Examples

“We’ve been using the term Artist/Teacher. If the cover of *Time* had a portrait of someone and a title that said: ‘Artist/Teacher—Who are they? Why are they so valuable in education?’ then it wouldn’t be a question of selling the idea. Superintendents would be saying, ‘Where are they? How come we don’t have them in our schools?’ People would quickly recognize the connection of creative thinking with arts and business and life, and soon Getty and Bennington would get phone calls asking, ‘Where do we get these Artist/Teachers?’”

**Ron Berger**, *Teacher, Shutesbury Elementary School*

Many good practices are already in place. Not every model that works effectively in one setting is replicable, but it might be adaptable; participants talked about “scaling up models” for adaptation in other settings by sharing best practices and examples.

“We’ve all come back to this idea of noticing, attentiveness, attention, collaboration, learning from unexpected places. These are themes that don’t fall anywhere in the models of education that I’m familiar with at the K–12 level. Yet we’re all saying that they’re vitally important. We need a movement more than a model. There’s a good model, but how can you get passion around it? In all parts of the country? How can you build on what exists?”

**Josh Green**, *Manchester Craftsmen’s Guild*

This symposium should be one part of an ongoing conversation. Perhaps annual meetings in several places nationwide could continue the process of culling and sharing examples of good practices. Participants—from as varied an institutional cross-section as at the Bennington symposium—would have the materials to think through adapting models to their own educational contexts. Collecting and publicizing good practice is linked to the public policy and advocacy leg of the strategy.

### Inquiry or Research

Research feeds good practice and good policy. Inquiry engages the field, evaluates and informs improvement. Planning for research is at the heart of the “Bennington manifesto.” Research outcomes can be used in advocating arts education to policy-makers on all levels. Two areas of initial focus for the research agenda might be:

- Survey best practices or examples of the artist’s role in education, places that excel in preparing artists for teaching, and programs that are based on development of artistic portfolios as part of a student’s intellectual formation.
- Develop a set of meaningful questions for research, including models for the pedagogy of artists as teachers, and how that pedagogy transfers to the teaching of other disciplines.

## Conclusion: Collaborative Partnerships

The artistic and the educational: throughout the symposium, these were seen as two parts of the equation of social change. Given that these are distinct spheres of policy and practice needing connection, who are the agents capable of fulfilling that role? Certainly artists, the primary focus of the symposium, should play a critical role in connecting the arts with education more effectively. But driving those connections through changes in policy and practice can only be achieved when institutions commit to linking artists with educational structures and process. Acting in isolation wastes both institutional and social capital. Effective change won't come from unilateral efforts but through collaborative partnerships. As educational and cultural institutions contemplate how to help change the second-citizen status of the arts in our educational system and welcome artists in that mix, collaboration will be their responsibility, and their social obligation on the local and global levels.

“ A lot of things have happened here by way of making contacts, gathering information, seeing issues differently. Just as theory, practice, and policy are the new totem, I'm certain that the way forward for us is not unilateral, it's collaborative. Part of the challenge is deciding who our partners will be—and not just partners in arts education, but in educational policy, economic development, science, and technology. That's our new question. ”

**Ken Robinson, *J. Paul Getty Trust***

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