

# Conversation as Pedagogy in the Teaching of Art

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## Recommended Citation

Zander, Jane. "Conversation as Pedagogy in the Teaching of Art." *Marilyn Zurmuehlin Working Papers in Art Education* 14 (1997): 186-189.

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## Conversation as Pedagogy in the Teaching of Art

Jane Zander

This is a short "portrait" from my dissertation that is only meant to give you the flavor of my research. I hope you enjoy it.

*"I've learned more than I ever learned in my whole life [in this class]. When I came in I was uncomfortable but I really liked the class, because it was kinda free and he really wasn't like the other teachers. He was very open about everything that he explained to us and I enjoyed it. And I know it is totally different."*

(comment from a student)

In my research I wanted to know what a teacher had said to inspire this kind of response in a group of high school students. How do art teachers maintain control of a class and yet develop an atmosphere in which students feel free to create and express themselves as individuals? If the arts are generally considered to "teach" creativity, how is language used in this process? Are there any particular ways of saying things that spark the creative juices, or how does a teacher frame his or her instruction so that students are empowered to develop their own ideas.

Steve, the teacher I studied was an exceptional teacher but he began his class much like any other. As students came through the door, Steve gave them directions. His classroom looked like an art room in any university or school of art, but this was a high school. It was bare except for a dozen drawing benches scattered about the room. Two score of flimsy easels were piled against one another at one side. The floor was unfinished concrete waxed to an institutional sheen.

*"Put it by the board here. Make sure it is identified. I don't want to guess who handed in what."*

When the students continued milling about he lowered his voice and said firmly and almost inaudibly. "Stop!"

There was a long pause and then Steve continued almost in a whisper but very slowly and deliberately with a measured rhythm to his phrasing and emphasis placed on every third syllable.

*"Place **all three components** of the **final exam** on the **table over there**. If it is **large**, like **Sara's canvas**. **Put it here** on the **board**."*

His voice returned to a normal volume but the even rhythm continued.

*"Make **sure** that **all** the pieces are **clearly indicated** as to **who owns what**. As well, I **need to see** those **pieces** that you **intend to submit to the Student Museum show** and I **need to see them today!**"*

There are no terms of politeness here and the absence is significant (Brown, P. & Levinson, S. C., 1994). When these directions are not immediately followed, the word "Stop" and the silence which follows it create a dramatic pause which demands attention. The students sense the silence and when they look over at their teacher, they see that his head is erect and his body stiff and his face unsmiling as if in reprimand. In silence and stillness. Steve has taken full control of the class.

The talk is an example of what Amidon, & Flanders, (1967) Amidon and Hunter (1966) would refer to as direct teacher talk. It is commanding, but it also fits into the category of scolding -- although the reprimand remains unsaid.

The students, however, did not seem to respond to the comments as scolding. It is the end of the year, they know the routine. They held themselves responsible for their behavior and they comply immediately. Were these ideal students in an ideal class? I don't think so, but there is a respect between student and teacher which has been negotiated throughout the school year and it shows in how students are empowered in some situations and dominated in others.

The atmosphere relaxes and the students begin to fill the conversational void. This becomes a time when there is a transition from the administrative duties of the class into instruction. One girl complains about her hair band not working right, but although she is loud, her comment is unintelligible and ignored. A few students engage in some light chatter and then they begin to assemble on the assorted drawing benches grouped in the middle of the room and they and drew them up to listen.

Steve sat in a green plastic chair, the only seating fixture in the room with a back on it, and he leaned forward to continue a conversation that had begun the day before. After twenty years of developing a highly respected art program, he was leaving this school to teach at another similar school and to begin work on his doctorate. There were a few questions about where Steve was going and why, but then the students quieted and both students and teacher leaned toward each other and there were no distractions.

*"So, what can I do for you in these last few days so that you feel comfortable about next year?"* The question was rhetorical and Steve did not wait for a reply.

*"You may find the program somewhat different. You may find the system somewhat different. And I'm kind of feeling a little guilty about you guys in particular because it usually takes about a year or two for the system that I use to really start to kick in -- so [that] you start to feel comfortable and be yourself and actually get the idea that you can work anywhere."*

*"You are not controlled by the environment. You aren't controlled by the material. You can use just a stubby little pencil to do high quality work."*

*So the worst thing for me [to do] would be to leave you guys in the half way zone, because you really haven't had a lot of high tech technical training. (aside) That just kinda comes along with your perceptual development and your own personality."*

Linguists and sociolinguists, (Amidon, E.J., & Hunter, E.H., 1966; Amidon, E.J., & Flanders, N.A. 1967,) would criticize this as being a lecture. They have reported that teachers who are identified as superior by their students and colleagues use fewer instances of direct teacher talk than do teachers who are ranked low. Similarly, Courtney Cazden (1988) would refer to the use of rhetorical questioning and a lecture format as a teaching device which stifles student input. Steve, however, does a lot of lecturing. He doesn't lecture for every class, but the bulk of his instruction is conveyed to students in a lecture format, but it is not so much the style of his speech that is important, but the content. It is obvious that Steve is worried that these students will not continue to get the kind of support that will encourage them to work independently.

He must also be aware that the other art teachers emphasize photographic realism and production rather than emotion and individual expression for he creates a hypothetical example.

*"So, if you were to go to another program where they were focused on these photographic renderings of still life and stuff, you might just feel a little uncomfortable in that position. Frankly you might not draw all that well, Not in a **global** sense but I think that the trade off is that you **think** very well and you **feel** very well and that **inside** stuff is going to work its way **outside** and get into your **hand** and get into your **pencil** and get into the **paint brush** and you will make these **incredible** images."*

Steve excels at focusing on the essence of a situation and he speaks in a rhythm that almost drives the point home in a way that imitates poetry as he says,

*"You **think** very well and you **feel** very well and that **inside** stuff is going to work its way **outside**."*

There is an emphasis on each syllable which approaches poetry in its metronomic quality and although the imagery is slightly confusing, the metaphors being created stretch the imaginations of the listeners. The repetition of these phrases is accompanied by sweeping hand movements which add deliberateness to the phrasing and emphasize the accented words.

These hand movements also direct the flow of thought from one image to another like the swaying motion of a snake charmer-- and the students are entranced. The moment of instruction has become a mini-drama, and he orchestrates it artistically.

It doesn't matter that the student may not know what it is to think very well and "feel" very well -- the phrasing is rather ambiguous but the meaning comes from the combination of associations. The words by themselves are ambiguous

and not particularly well stated, but the image that they connect with is that of something unique that each student knows is inside him or her. This is the inner core which Steve has tried so hard to awaken in them: the part that feels and knows itself.

In some ways, what Steve has just said stands out because of the spiritual nature of the information. Schools in the United States don't really talk much about what is inside a person or what is "real". Some teachers do not feel comfortable with such comments. In some arenas of public education, this is not considered appropriate or politically correct, but Steve's comments do not suggest or promote any kind of political agenda. Rather, he is encouraging students to look inside themselves and to get in touch with what they think and feel. He encourages them to think and to trust in their own judgement.

Steve has said that he has tried to teach other teachers to teach as he does, but he was unsuccessful, because they didn't truly believe that the purpose of education was not to convey information, but to teach students what it is to be human. In carefully studying the conversational aspects of a teacher who was loved by his students and colleagues, what eventually became apparent was that it wasn't so much what this teacher said about art, but what he didn't say. He didn't tell people what art is, he showed them how to use materials, but then he was able to help them through the creative process by identifying the landmarks along the way.

Because he was a practicing artist, he fully understood the processes of creating art. But he was able to identify the feelings that go along with creating art and to explain them and the process of creating art to his students. In many of his conversations, he used a very directed approach to teaching, but it was his ability to understand what was happening inside not only his students, but himself that made him able to become a mentor and master teacher.

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