

## Kindness in the art classroom: kind thoughts on Stephen Rowland

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This article is a response to Stephen Rowland's article, *Kindness*, which appeared in *London Review of Education*, November 2009. Much to my amazement, Stephen Rowland's article was the only one I found when I did a global database search on 'kindness in education'. I had thought that I would find reams of information in the databases on the topic that I had wanted to write about. So I am grateful for the depth of information provided in *Kindness*; it led the way for this, my own article on 'kindness in education'.

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When I was a child attending Catholic grammar school, I used to wonder why the nuns and priests lectured us to be 'good' when I felt they themselves were so mean. Years later, while researching creativity for my dissertation on art education, I was struck by a story I read about Einstein. As a youth, Einstein attended a very strict, regimented German school. He was so adversely affected by his learning experiences at that school he failed the entrance exam for the next school he applied to. He was then required to enrol in a remedial school. The remedial school had a relaxed atmosphere where students were allowed to initiate their own investigations. It was there that Einstein devised his first experiment that would lead him to the theory of relativity (Amabile 1983, 7).

'Kindness – that is, the ability to bear the vulnerability of others' (Phillips and Taylor 2009, 8) is what I argue is needed in the culture of an art classroom before students can feel it's safe for them to engage in artwork that is creative and meaningful. If Einstein was overwhelmed by a school's regime, it is reasonable to expect that many students may feel overwhelmed by school. The art teacher is responsible for creating a classroom culture where all students are valued and respected, so that students can grow as people and as artists. In such an environment art students are more apt to understand that their vulnerabilities are understood and accepted. It can be frightening for children to explain their artwork and ideas to peers. But if art teachers guard young artists from harsh, unkind comments from fellow students, trust is built among members of the classroom community, and a safe place is created in the art room. Such a safe place is bound to nurture art students in deep and innovative thinking about art.

Currently, the focus of American society is highly tilted toward capitalism, which 'is no system for the kindhearted' (Phillips and Taylor 2009, 103). Yet, 'kindness as a public virtue, built upon a commitment to social justice' (Rowland 2009, 209) is gaining attention in many education circles, including art education. And who is a better model of kindness as a public virtue than an art teacher?

Stewart (1997, 36) writes that the art teacher 'helps establish a non-threatening environment by reinforcing student attempts'. In *Red* (Logan 2009, 10), the biographical play about Mark Rothko, the Rothko character speaks to his assistant about a Rothko painting:

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So, now, what do you see? – Be specific. No, be exact – but sensitive. You understand? Be kind. Be a human being, that's all I can say. Be a *human being* for once in your life! These pictures deserve compassion and they live or die in the eye of the sensitive viewer, they quicken only if the empathetic viewer will let them. That is what they cry out for. That is why they were created. That is what they deserve... Now... What do you see?

Rothko was asking his assistant to bear the painter's vulnerability about his work – he was asking the assistant to 'be kind'.

As an art educator, I put my belief in the power of kindness in the art classroom to the test in a four month-long community after school art program that I created. In the program, eight undergraduate university students and I designed and implemented an inquiry-based art curriculum for 10 under-served, urban elementary school children. These children typically have art class for about 30 minutes a week in their public school. We supplemented that instruction with three additional hours of art class a week, through an after school arts program conducted twice a week.

After having done research in critical thinking and the arts for several years, I discovered that teachers who place an emphasis on inquiry in the classroom engage their students' in problem-solving which can lead to the development of critical thinking skills. So, I designed the after school art program to engage students in art inquiry. I speculated that such an art program would increase the children's critical thinking abilities, enabling them to make reasoned decisions about art and the world.

Using a pre-test/post-test method (Bracken et al. 2003), I did university and family approved research on the change in the critical thinking abilities of the children over the course of the art program.

The inquiry-based curriculum we implemented was comprised of a series of open-ended art making activities and discussions about art. With the lessons we designed the children created art and reflected on their own and their fellow students' responses to open-ended creative questions.

We used Barrett's (1997, 48–9) three easy to remember questions for stimulating student discussions about art. His questions are: 'What do I see? What is the artwork about? How do I know?'

Barrett's three questions are effective tools for stimulating critical thinking because responding to these questions requires that young people provide evidence and reasoning with the descriptions and interpretations they share. Careful, sound, evidence-based discussion may convince one student to reconcile the perspective of another with their own viewpoint when interpreting an artwork, an important facet of critical thinking (Lampert 2006, 49).

As Barrett explains:

Providing reasons for interpretation prevents accepting any and everything someone might say about an artwork. Some interpretations are better than others because they have more evidence, and are more convincing and enlightening. Some descriptive observations are faulty (the subject may be a goat and not a unicorn); therefore, the interpretations built on them are likely to be flawed. Good interpretations are those that accurately reflect what is in the work and what brings life to it; they reveal to viewers what there is to consider about the work, and engage others in informed thought and discussion about art and life.

Additionally, we used Stewart's (1997, 37) guidelines for facilitating open-ended discussions about artwork. She recommends teachers initially take the leading role in such discussions, but that 'as students become more adept in dialogue, they can take turns functioning in the role of facilitator'. Stewart recommends that in a friendly, non-threatening way the facilitator: keep the discussion focused; raise questions without providing answers; ask participants for clarification

and supporting evidence for their opinions; encourage and suggest alternative viewpoints; and provide closure by summarising the opinions that emerge in the discussion.

For example, one inquiry-based art activity that we utilised in the program engaged each child in creating a sculpture of what they imagined to be an ideal school building. Children were encouraged to create unique sculptures, rather than to imitate visual exemplars by other artists. After the art activity, the children discussed and explained to each other what they saw in the school sculptures, and what the visual imagery expressed and represented (Lampert 2008, 113).

Throughout the program, the undergraduates and I were role models for the children. Each day our program was in session, we displayed a bold coloured sign at the front of the class which read, 'Please respect everyone in the room'. We took care to insure the students in the program were treated kindly and respectfully at all times.

At the end of the after-school art program, I administered the critical thinking post-test. The results of the tests showed a statistically significant increase in the children's average critical thinking skills scores from the pre-tests to the post-tests ( $p = .020$ ). I believe the positive outcome of this program was, in part, due to kindness the university students and I exhibited to the children in our art program. We were able 'to bear the vulnerability' of the young artists as they worked on and discussed art: and perhaps that resulted in a safe place where the children could grow cognitively. Given my experiences with kindness, I call for all teachers to consider the merits of kindness in the classroom.

### Notes on contributor

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