

# "Staying within the lines"

Re-imagining What is "Elementary" in the Art of Schooling

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## Preambling Within the Lines

*It is hard to imagine exactly where to begin in describing fully the complexities, and the overwhelming contingencies and interdependencies of ordinary classroom events, especially when something happens. We have always fantasized that, if only we had enough video equipment, tape recorders, or patience or ears, or research assistants; if we could write well enough, with fine grain and detail and desire; if we would produce a record of events fast enough, we could overcome this difficulty and surmount this odd feeling of "lack" (Loy 1999). We have found, after many painful attempts, that this feeling of lack can never be filled with "enough".*

*Therefore the children's art work in this paper seems nearly unimaginable, even to us who were there to witness its emergence. The classroom conditions within which the children's work in this paper was produced were, on the face of it, dead ordinary. This classroom was in an ordinary, middle-class Canadian elementary school, full of ordinary children, working under the same deadly ordinariness of curriculum demands and report card deadlines as any other. The only visible differences were that they were surrounded by the works of various artists and were given the odd gift of time to think about, to talk about, to argue over, and to practice for themselves, the alluring ins and outs of this work and its disciplines. These children were deeply presumed to be able of more than the sometimes shocking trivialities we often expect of young children in the early grades of school.*

*The living context that cultivated this work was longer than a year because some of the children followed one of the teachers from kindergarten to Grade One. So these are the real contexts that embody this work: a generous sense of time, the solid belief that our children should be surrounded by works of grace and beauty,*

*and the equally solid belief that, in such alluring times-places, good work, far outstripping our images of children's ability, can happen.*

I

With Christmas approaching, the laments of the student-teachers in our undergraduate Early Childhood Education methods classes were almost inevitable. Practicum was starting and the photocopied black-line Santa faces, all ready for colouring and gluing, were already beginning to appear, an appearance as consistent as the disappearing of red and green construction paper through school-system supply cupboards.

We had wonderful, difficult discussions in our class about these Santa Faces. Where do they come from? What do they tell us about our images of children, of teaching, of the work of schooling, about art, about creativity, about visual literacy, about craft, about the returns of light into the world that Christmas portends, about the nature of "the gift" (Jardine, Clifford & Friesen, in press) as an image of teaching and learning, about the Europeaness of our schooled presumptions?

We talked about how deeply disappointing are some of the taken-for-granted practices inside elementary schools and about how the (shared and contested) disciplines and traditions and ancestries of human life so often and so seemingly easily become black-line-mastered in the practices of schooling. Many of the "activities" these student teachers confronted contained no body, no richness, few real pleasures. The students spoke of a sort of strangulated "thinness" to a lot of school-work, and sense of seemingly deliberately holding back the beauties and difficulties of the world that we and our children readily experience outside of schools.

We talked about how our image of "the basics" seems to have been co-opted by

such images of "thinness" and we quarrelled over where this image of "the basics" in elementary education actually comes from, and what this has done to our ability to imagine the fulness of the human inheritance(s) we are entrusted to pass on to our children.

We commiserated over our own experiences of such black-line Santa Faces and the wisps of cotton balls stuck on our fingertips and having too much glue, and precisely what sorts of satisfactions and disappointments we ourselves had felt over doing such things ourselves as parts of our own schooling.

We talked about how easily young children are willing to trust the teacher's images and understandings of the world and therefore, how many children, even by Grade One, have already come to "enjoy" such "art activities." We talked, therefore, about the difficult position of the beginning teacher who is sometimes faced with children who are already inculcated into a thin and hyperactive (Jardine 1996) version of "schooled activities."

In a horrible turn of events, children's enjoyment of such activities can be too easily offered as an adequate pedagogical case for their continuance. Worse yet, such enjoyment can sometimes be offered as an adequate reason for dismissing (as "theoretical") any critical consideration of what such activities actually portend about the lives of our children and our lives with them in schools. Such critical considerations can be simply seen as speaking against children's enjoyment or against the confident voice of "practical experience": "I've taught for years and my kid's really like it!"

One thing we settled on in our class is that no one could quite remember or decide precisely *whose* "black-lines" these actually are. Their origins have faded from view. Such activities seem to be perpetuated in schools, year after year, in the midst of a sort of personal and cultural amnesia. They seem to just *happen*,

with no rich or satisfying pedagogical trace-lines attached. They have become, in a strange sense, unaddressable, mute, authorless, anonymous, impersonal, almost automatic in their regular, yearly appearances. However, it is ironic that, given such anonymity and impersonalness, attempts to question them and their nature and place and prevalence in our schools often seems *profoundly* personal, like a vaguely offensive affront to the genuine good-heartedness of teachers and to their generous willingness to share all they have with student-teachers. As one teacher attested, nearly in tears, during a Professional Development Day when one of the authors raised questions about the thinning out of much of the world's beauties in our elementary school classrooms: "I've been doing the sorts of things you described for years, and I don't think that I've ever actually *harmed* a child."

This was clearly a courageous statement that attests to the personal and emotional depth of our mutual, often unvoiced and unnoticed and unquestioned investment in the taken-for-granted, well-meant practices of schooling. It is unfortunate, however, that, in the face of this courageous admission, none of those present could find how to continue what had been a thoughtful and difficult conversation about weak practice for fear of having anything that was henceforth said taken as a personal insult. In the end, what started out as personal courage ended up as a sort of public cowardice on *everyone's* behalf. What this attests too, among many threads of implication, is the ways in which "the personal," however unintendedly, more deeply entrenches each of us into an odd powerlessness to speak *out* about what we witness in our schools.

## II

In light of our conversations about Santa Faces, our curriculum class began to talk at length about wanting children to understand the deep, delicious, disciplined character of the world. Our talk was organized, in part, around a passage from David G. Smith's (1999, 139) brilliant and often frightening essay "Children and

the gods of war":

*It is as if young people ask for, above all else, not only a genuine responsiveness from their elders but also a certain direct authenticity, a sense of that deep human resonance so easily suppressed under the smooth human-relations jargon teachers typically learn in college. Young people want to know if, under the cool and calm of efficient teaching and excellent time-on-task ratios, life itself has a chance, or whether the surface is all there is.*

We played with Smith's images of "thinness" and "surfaces" by looking at the thin plastic "wood veneer" surfaces of the desks we were using at the University. They are flat and easy to keep clean and clear of any traces of anyone having been here before (or after) us; they require little care, little attention, little notice, and they refuse any attempt at cultivating a sense of craft, relationship, memory, obligation or commitment; they resemble wood, but they are obviously fake, obviously cheap. They are not interesting or memorable or important or worthy of note. Nothing can especially *happen* over them. In fact, they are designed so that little will happen. They will simply eventually "break" and be replaced by equally thin, non-stick surfaces; and all this will happen without our remembering, without our having to directly suffer such passing.

(All of this akin to black-line Santa Faces: little will happen, it's just an "activity" with a lesson-planned date-time-place-rationale-objectives-materials-plan-closure-assessment-follow-up that will simply eventually "be done" (usually in about twenty to forty minutes) and sent home and be replaced by the next worksheet activity.)

We talked of how exhausting it is to surround ourselves with a world which not only does not *need* "[ours or our students'] continuity of attention and devotion" (Berry 1977, 34), but is precisely designed to *prevent* the necessity, even the

*possibility* of such attention and devotion. We spoke of ecological issues of disposability, immediacy, distraction, consumption and what we and our children become when this is what we surround ourselves with (Jardine, in press). We toyed, then, with how surrounding ourselves with such disposability produces an "unsettledness" (Berry 1977) which, in consequence, not only produces a sort of experiential acceleration (since nothing especially requires much care and attention [see Jardine 1996;]) but also aggravates a sense of "lack" and "want" (Loy 1999; Smith 1999a, 1999b) that then pushes us into even more (eventually itself unsatisfying) consumption.

One student called out "Life Long Learning!" and we all initially laughed over an eerie shock of recognition. This phrase no longer sounded like simply or only good news. And, as with the teacher mentioned above, none of us have ever meant any harm with such a phrase. However, suddenly, under its surface charm lay questions as yet unposed.

We eventually bumped up against Martin Heidegger's (1977) contention that, in surrounding ourselves with such a thin, consumptive surface world, *we ourselves* become "disposable," part of a "standing reserve" (111) in the service of, in our case, the machinations of schooling. After all, with this photocopied black-line Santa Face, what difference in the world does it make that *this* child filled it in and did such gluing and colouring? *This* child is simply one of a long line of thousands and thousands of children who have given themselves over to the replicating continuance of the anonymous appearance of such black-lines year after year. Not only does the worksheet become an object of producing and consuming; children become producers and consumers and, worse yet, a great deal of their time in schools, their *lives* in schools, are consumed with momentary, eventually unrewarding "activity." *Children themselves*—because they are, after all, spending an enormous part of *being* a child in school—*become produced and consumed*, oddly bought and sold. Think, for example, of the rank-order postings of school

achievements, or how grade point averages determine a student's marketable saleability to a University or a good job.

We then took up Smith's challenge, Is this odd, fractured array of thin, meagre surfaces all there is to this world we are passing on to our children? It was clear when students reflected on their own elementary school experiences and on the nature of many of the classrooms in which they were placed as student teachers, that fragmented, thinned out and isolated bits and pieces are often what counted for "the basics" in elementary schools. We then asked: is there some way of speaking about age, character, memory, inheritance, ancestry, work, discipline and care as themselves "basic" to the living disciplines with which we are entrusted as teachers? Are the things we taken-for-grantedly surround ourselves and our children with in schools worthy of attention? Do they *call for* (Heidegger 1968) something more than a surface-gloss, momentary "activity," a momentary "distraction?"

These, of course, are very tough questions.

Therefore, when we ask, following David Smith, whether "life itself has a chance," we are never speaking *solely* of the life and experiences of the child or *solely* the life and experiences of the teacher. We are speaking, as well, for example, of art as a *living* discipline, i.e., as a discipline full of lives, in which there is some life, some vigour and character, a discipline in which a child might find their own liveliness able to live itself out in the presence of a whole, living world of relations and traditions and shared and contested ancestries.



After "The Scream"

by Edvard Munch

Students in our University curriculum class spoke of still somehow wanting to keep the children "together," within a bounded space of work, working, somehow, "on the same thing"" or in the same place, together, somehow. We talked of how these Santa Faces perhaps were designed to fulfill such promise: they are a "parameter" of sorts, circumscribing the work, making it vaguely topical and seasonal, giving a sense of boundedness and clarity, circumscribing and limiting choices and demands. However, students consistently report that when they are in classrooms where such activities are commonplace, it feels, as one student-teacher put it, "more like a 'classroom management class' than an 'art class.'"



Moreover, students reported that, during such activities, time always seems to be running out (typical of the time of the machine, the time of production and consumption, as Wendell Berry [1983] suggests). There is, with such activities, a sort of build-in franticness and distraction, even a low-level near-panic. Several students in such elementary school settings reported witnessing four, five, once even up to eight different hand-out photocopied "activities" occurring in a Grade One classroom *before morning recess*. We speculated as to whether the demands of schooling (e.g., the wonderfully cryptic and monstrous "covering the curriculum") created the need for such "activities" or whether these are two beasts feeding off each other, each finding in the other its excuse to continue unquestioned.

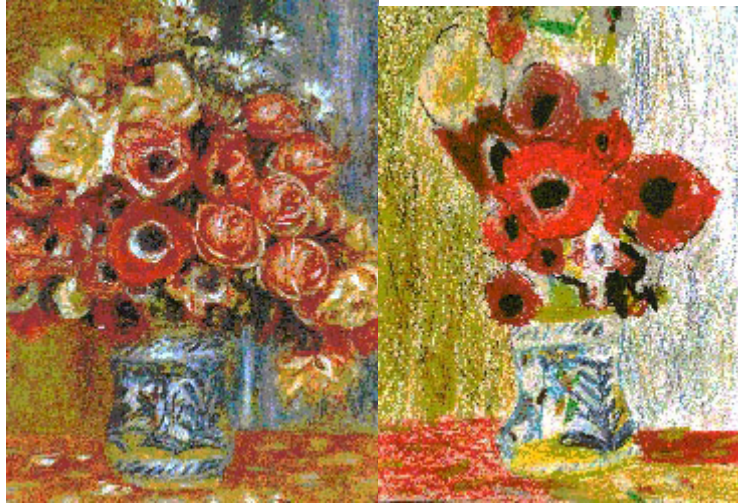
We agreed that if that franticness and panic is all that "staying within the lines" can mean, we'd rather not. We wanted "something else."

What has happened in many elementary school classrooms is that the stupefying character of black-line Santa Faces have sometimes been replaced with what could be understood as their equally abstract opposite. Rather than beginning with anonymous, authorless, impersonal black-line masters, classroom work is organized around the personal, authorial, creative, unique, individuality of each child. Each child thus becomes, theoretically at least, their own "master." As is so often the case in educational theory and practice, we find ourselves riding another pendulum (Throne 1994) by simply inverting the situation we despise.

In rolls "the metaphysics of the genius" (Jardine & Batycky, 2000) where each unique child becomes an artist, an author (Jardine 1992). We find ourselves standing helpless before the generative uniqueness of each child (Arendt 1969; Jardine, Clifford and Friesen in press a), declaring "you're the 'god' of your own story" (Melnick 1997, 372). And, in such declaration, we declare ourselves

unworthy or unable to do anything but "facilitate" their creative urges.

#### IV

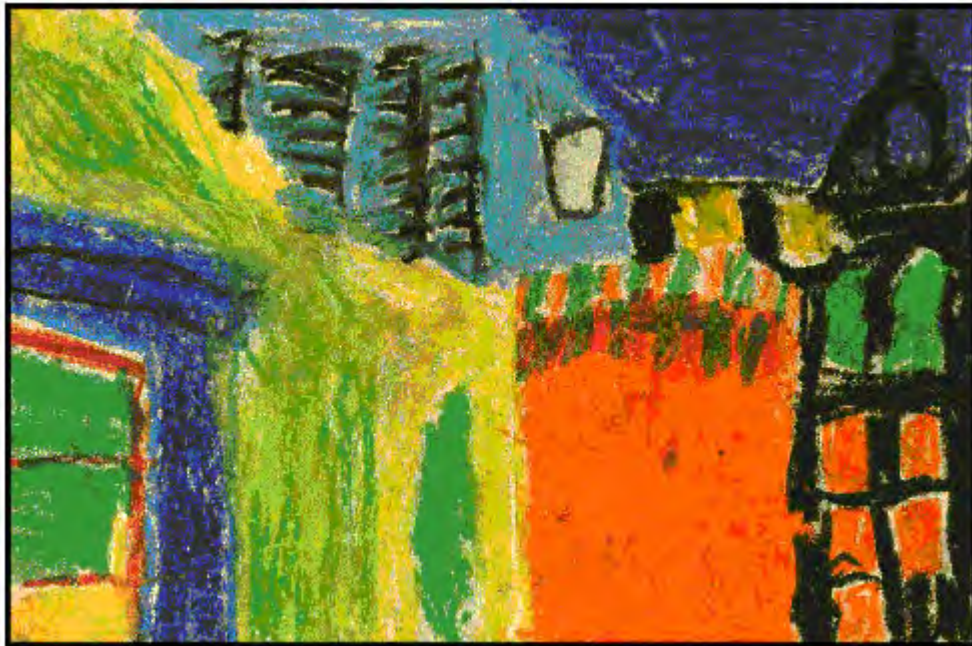


"Roses" by Renoir | After "Roses" by Renoir

*At the first round of parent-teacher interviews in October, one of the parents commented while viewing her child's work. "I just can't believe what these kids are capable of! This isn't colouring, this is actually drawing. You gave them a blank piece of paper and they did **this**? I can't believe it!." To be honest, I think that this is somewhat sad, that this is so unbelievable to a parent. I mean, why shouldn't a child be capable of this? But then again, I didn't just "give them a blank piece of paper." Our water-colour project involved viewing and critique art work of the Group of Seven and practising the blends and bleeds of colour on different papers. I believe that this provoke the children into thinking about possibilities for their own works and thus helped them to begin developing their own internal "lines."*

Instead of being ready weakly, "staying within the lines" can point to the sensuous, immediate presence of the materiality of a real, living world that roils

within the bounds of a particular style of art or the (debatable) limits and (equally debatable) generousities of a particular living tradition, or the work of a particular artist, or the intensity of a particular creation, like Vincent VanGogh's *Cafe Scene at Night (1888)*:



The children whose work is found in this paper are from kindergarten and Grade One. These children have carefully studied such paintings and the lives of those who made them. They played with moist workings of watercolour paint on different papers, or the pulls of wet chinks and dry chinks, absorbencies. They measured the spatialities had with moving Leo-Leonian tears of papers placed apart, leaving emptiness-forms in between things. They practised layering colours. They laboured over imitating "the masters," not in order to be mastered by them, but in order to feel the labours of the works that surrounded them and to learn some worldly limits, and how the limits of Matisse draw out of them different things than the limits of Renoir, open them to different worlds of relations and interrelations, different demands and desires and possibilities. They rested over lovely books with lovely illustrations and learned the intimacies between reading

the text and reading the pictures.

They *practised these arts*, developing, each in their own way and within the limits of their own lives and experiences, a feel for the various materialities of these worlds, these odd, debatable inheritances. They experimented in class with the pulling of a horizon line downwards or upwards, invoking the Greek ghosts of proportionality and figure that will arise again in the Grade Six mathematics class and beyond. They sketched out the lives of different artists—hundreds of women found in dancing ballerinas with the master-artisan always picturing himself full of disdain and distance— listening to their own words being read out in the classroom and speaking with their parents about the inevitability of the nude form that they'll be encountering. Now the children were surrounded, not only with large prints of the work-world of the Impressionists, but with their own work gathered on walls together because each child had journeyed, so to speak, to the same rich, contested topography, the same rich, contested "place."

Suddenly, there are "lines" everywhere, but they are not solid, they are not uncontested or unambiguous, they are not "givens," and they are not always straight and linear. Instead of keeping children "together" within the bounds of the abstract black-lines of a Santa Face (or abandoning them to its abstract opposite of "uniqueness"), children can be kept "together" within the more sensuous, more ambiguous, more tangled, more rich, more compelling, more variegated, more demanding, more disciplined lines of a particular, located, encultured, historical, image-filled, worldly inheritance. However, the sense in which children are now "together" is such that they must *entering into the ongoing, living conversations that constitutes such inheritances*. They must enter into the "real work" (Snyder 1980) of this world because this world *is* its real work; it *is* its "gathering and collecting" (Gadamer 1989, 106) intergenerationally, through time, in a located and specifiable history and place. Their individual presence and witness to such inheritances becomes visible as *essential to the living character of those*

*inheritances*. In fact, "only *in* the multifariousness of such voices do [such inheritances] exist" (Gadamer 1989, 284).

Suddenly, these children were no longer alone, either with their own Santa Face that seemed to arrive from nowhere except school, nor with their own "creativity." They found themselves *together* in a place with a highly contested, rich, alluring shape and history and character. With these experiences in hand, a whole part of the world opened up for the children, a free-but-limited range of possibilities, avenues to be explored. It is as if the children had been ushered into a "place" that had character and that allowed and housed and took good care of certain possibilities that are now free to explore and transform, to refuse or take up, to expand or imitate or combine or break apart.

Rather than squelching creativity, the techniques and terminologies and visual literacies they learned helped form and shape and solidify and protect and open up their creativity to possibilities and limits that cannot be found within the subjectivizing metaphysics of creativity and genius (Gadamer 1989; Jardine & Batycky 2000). Instead of this Romantic image of creative genius, children's creativity was able to be strongly held in the embrace of the world and was able to *present itself* through such holding, such embrace. Through these limited, within-the-lines creations, the difference and delicacy of each child's hand and eye and heart became visible. Moreover, and this cannot be emphasized too strongly, these differences became visible *in relation to each other*, and *because of* these relations. The "field of living worldly relations" into which the children and teachers were ushered allowed and provided for (a wide range of) difference. These art worlds were strong and resilient and contested enough to hold the full range of different children together in relations of kind, so that the fields of their differing, living relations could be *worked out* and not just *worked on*. Here, in this place, each child just might *make a difference* and not just *be different*.

*This* child still stands in a long line of thousands who have brought forward, for example, Van Gogh's work and world, but now, it is a *bloodline* full of characters and faces and histories and questions and contestations and vigorous debates and tales to tell and different takes on the tales that have been told or left unsaid. One wonderful example, given the cultures of the children in these particular classroom, was Van Gogh's (and Europe's) late nineteenth century "orientalism." The work these children were entering in to was rich enough and real enough that such a debate became possible because of it.

The practicum students in the Early Childhood Education class agreed: *this* is a strong (albeit rather frightening at first glance, rather intimidating) sense of "classroom community," where we gather together *in* our differences *over* something worthy of our attention. The trouble is, of course, that this by itself leaves as yet unaddressed questions of what is worthy of our attention.

## V

After Monet's "Waterlilies"



We've just returned from taking another group of practicum students to the school and again, a similar response not yet noted: the unanticipated, bewildering, sensuous *pleasure* of experiencing such works. That first reaction was nearly autonomic: a gasped intake of breath, and the immediate desire to look more closely, to remain here, to go back and forth, to let the bewilderment settle in and to let the realities of what they are seeing take hold. All the students admitted that these children's works are *beautiful*. This is *good work*.

It might have been theoretically possible, sitting there a wee bit stunned in the school hallway, to enter into some ethical or epistemological quarrel, and raise claims of "how do you know it is good work?" or "what is good work?" or "who is to say?", but that sensuous first moment was undeniable, even though we might be able to *think* our way out of its demand and its address.

## Endbit

*Perhaps it is because this is my first "official" year of teaching, that I find the preceding questions and the hundreds of other similar questions swirling in my mind to be challenging, frustrating and inspiring all at once. At the same time, I feel fortunate to have all of these seemingly endless, complex questions to ponder, rather than believing in simple answers.* (Tanya Graham, Personal Reflections, 1998)

Back in our practicum methods class, a student-teacher remarked, partly in amusement, partly in confusion and disgust, that she had been handed *the very same black-line master of Santa's face* some 18 years before, in her own E.C.E. class.

Three classes later, she brought in her own Santa face, browned from age, missing some cotton balls, pulled from a box in her mother's basement. We began, again, the slow and painful turns of re-imagining what is elementary in these arts of schooling.

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