

Making it up as we go along: Reflections from artists learning to teach

Kathleen Vaughan
PhD Candidate and Artist-in-Residence
Faculty of Education, York University

1-17 Raglan Ave.
Toronto, Canada M6C 2K7

(416) 654-9036
kathleen@akaredhanded.com

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Today, I am speaking to you on the subject of “Making it up as we go along: Reflections from artists learning to teach.” The artists in question are a group of 41 professionals of all disciplines—dancers, musicians, dramatists, visual artists—who during the 2002-03 academic year retrained to become junior and intermediate level classroom teachers, and who just graduated from York University’s Bachelor of Education program. Throughout this talk, I will show you visuals and reference texts by these students¹, created as components of their coursework.

My intention here is to celebrate these students’ excellent work and correspondingly to demonstrate the value and impact on hands-on arts activities in teacher education programs such as this one. I will also highlight similarities between artistic and teaching practices, suggesting that these students’ professional histories in the arts as well as their arts-oriented coursework, may make them better teachers. “Better”—meaning more flexible, more creative, more responsive to and respectful of individual differences, and more ingenious in their problem solving.

I had the great privilege of working with in two capacities with these teacher candidates². I was their instructor for a fall term course called Arts and Ideas, about discovering and expressing an individual philosophy of teaching with a special emphasis on arts advocacy. And in the winter, I worked again with these students in my capacity of Artist-in-Residence at York’s Faculty of Education, facilitating the visual component of an arts-based assignment that I will describe later.

Yes, I am an artist myself, currently pursuing my PhD in Education, exploring art as a mode of knowing and using my own visual practice as the core of my research. I too am learning to teach, in the academic post-secondary realm now after many years as a visiting artist teaching hands-on art to all levels from Grade 4 up. And so my own journey has many parallels to the journeys of the teacher candidates with whom I worked.

In fact, the way I have titled this talk, the notion of *journey* is foregrounded. After all, I have suggested that we're 'making it up as we go along' -- *as we go along* our journey in teaching. To represent our 'going along' to you today, I will use the metaphor of a canoe trip down Toronto's Humber River. In fact, I will use actual images from such a trip, photographed by one of the teacher candidates in question.

Image 1. Distant view, T. and canoe on riverbank

Before I explain how I consider this canoe trip to be a parallel to the beginning processes of artists learning to teach, let me say a word or two about the beginning portion of my title: 'making it up'.

"Making it up" suggests play, suggests imagination in action, suggests improvisation. In fact, about improvisation, musician Stephen Nachmanovitch (1990) writes:

Improvisation is intuition in action, a way to discover the muse and learn to respond to her call. Even if we work in a very structured, compositional way, we begin by that always surprising process of free invention in which we have nothing to gain and nothing to lose. The outpourings of intuition consist of a continuous, rapid flow of choice, choice, choice. (p. 41)

Those of us at the beginning of our journeys into teaching are constantly faced with choice, choice, choice. And while there may be a feeling of play to our choice making, it's not disingenuous. What we choose for or against is rooted in thought, training, feeling, experience, and reflection. The teacher candidates and I myself are aware of the importance of theoretical knowledge of teaching to our developing practices, to our understanding of our experiences with students. We work to bring theory to experience—and that was in fact the role of the course I taught on Arts and Ideas. The course aimed to bring intellectual and creative context to the teacher candidates' practical experiences, to suggest ways they might use theory to think about teaching.

Theory, as Deborah Britzman (2003) describes it, consists of “second thoughts” about experience (p. 4). In Arts and Ideas, in our hands-on art making, the teacher candidates and I revisited our experiences many times, using various theoretical standpoints as lenses. And in my own work creating this paper, I think for second, the twenty-second, the hundred and thirty-second time about my own approach to teaching. As I work, I find connections between creative practice and teaching practice, build theory that interweaves the two fields of endeavour. This talk reflects early stages of my formulating, of my own journey down that river.

Image 2: Prow of canoe in river

Let me tell you how this canoe trip came about. It was the result of an assignment I set early on in Arts and Ideas, requiring students to work in small groups to develop a ‘field trip’ that set learning goals, incorporated some aspect of visual learning and addressed the differences between the participants. I proposed that this trip could either be an adventure for themselves as adult learners or a dry run for a field trip that they might take with a classroom of children.

Most students visited galleries, museums, symphony performances, and films. However, four teacher candidates decided to undertake a trip down the Humber, pooling their varying knowledges of canoeing and expressing their experiences using a number of representational forms.³ Here’s how one of the canoe trip participants described their choice of event:

We want others to realize that art is not only to be enjoyed as a paid consumer in an established museum. Art lives outside a cultural, commercial institution. There may be people who feel uncomfortable being watched by guards at a museum, while they are expected to behave in a certain way. We want people to get involved with art, create their own meaning, reach out and touch it, manipulate it, create! By canoeing down a river, you realize that you are actually intervening on nature. (B., field trip documentation sheet, p. 3)

I like this statement. The author suggests that connection with art is at least as much a way of life, a way of seeing the world, as a discipline-based, high-culture practice—a sentiment I share.

Not only were the students required to go on and document a ‘trip’, they also had to present their work to their classmates.

Image 3. In-class version of canoeing

In presenting their canoe trip to the class, the four students aligned their chairs at the front of the class to represent their positions during their river journey. Miming paddling, they stroked twice on one side and then twice on the other. First left, then right, back and forth, they ‘stroked’ on each side as they took turns chanting the following oppositional attributes:

S.: Passive and institutionalized ... active, natural and realized

T.: Primary, first-hand impression ... mediated, controlled and secondary

B.: Involved participation ... non-participatory interaction

R.: Open, “democratic” space ... confined, hierarchical space

B. and T.: Alive, unrepresented, ‘art in motion’

R. and S.: Static, dead, cultural iconography

(B., R., S., T., presentation script, p. 1)

Quite an incantation! While I personally believe that our canoeists are a little hard on cultural institutions, I will say that the positive attributes they list reflect the values of York’s Faculty of Education. Here’s a quotation from York’s Pre-service Teacher Education Handbook 2002-03:

The Faculty is distinguished by its commitment to exploring ways to address equity, social justice, and environmental issues in all programmes. The Faculty values collaboration and an interdisciplinary orientation to education within an academic framework of inquiry into the interrelatedness of language and culture, teaching and learning. (p. 4)

Of course, the arts are an excellent vehicle for social justice education, a superb methodology for learning. In the teacher training program I am describing, teacher candidates learned to use the arts as a methodology in their own classrooms: one of my colleagues, Kathy Lundy, developed a course on Arts Integration just for this purpose. As you may know, and as Meryll Goldberg has written, arts integration includes learning *with* the arts—that is using the arts as a way of studying a subject, for example using abstract paintings such as the linear works of Mondrian to explore aspects of geometry. Arts integration also embraces learning *through* the arts, a method that encourages students to grapple with and express understandings of subject matter through an art form. Of course, learning *with* and *through* the arts leads to learning *about* the arts themselves, as disciplines in their own right (see Goldberg, 1997, p. 17-18).

Just as we instructors at York urged the teacher candidates to use arts-based teaching and learning in their own classrooms, so did we offer these emerging teachers multiple opportunities for their own arts-based responses, to work *through* and *with* the arts.

After all, as Maxine Greene (2001) writes:

There is no human being, no matter what age, who cannot be energized and enlarged when provided with opportunities to sing, to say, to inscribe, to render to show—to bring, through his or her devising, something new into the world. (p. 202)

The field trip assignment provided such options and many students danced, dramatized, musically interpreted or visually represented their experiences. In the instance of the canoe trip, the students' arts-based responses included

Image 4. In-class shot with documentation

- a video of their trip
- a script about their experiences
- stills from the video, some of which I am using in this presentation
- sketches of their river journey

Image 5. Trees along the Humber

As I have mentioned, my own visual artwork is very much part of my doctoral studies in education. I work in mixed media—paint, photography and textiles, primarily—to explore notions of identity construction within families, educational institutions, and other communities. Currently, I’m creating a series of unwearable clothing sculptures that have their origins in the garments my father wears in his childhood photo album, and writing about domestic photography, material culture, and the links between word and image. At this theoretical level, I am also concerned with connection to neighbourhood, the pedagogies of place, specifically of the ‘wild zones’⁴ which we design into our urban ravines and parkland. These concerns may partially explain the resonance of this Humber River field trip for me.

And speaking of ‘wild zones’, the circumstances of my teaching the “Arts and Ideas” course were a little wild in and of themselves.

Here’s what happened. On the afternoon of Friday, August 23rd, I got a message asking whether I would be interested in teaching a course called “Arts and Ideas” to the Fine Arts stream of the BEd program, starting virtually immediately? The program’s orientation began the following Monday, August 26th! Of course I jumped at the opportunity. And I worked frantically through the next two weeks to put together a course outline, reading list, and evaluation procedures—which included options for arts-based responses.

At the time, I felt as though—in keeping with our river journey motif—I had gone over the rapids in a barrel, except there are no rapids in the stretch of the Humber featured in this particular voyage. In fact, the Humber is described as quite a placid river, flowing through “Carolinean forests and meadows, past farms and abandoned mills, before meandering through the largest urban area in Canada, metropolitan Toronto” (Canadian Heritage River System, n.d., Humber River page, ¶ 1).

Image 6. Humber cliffside

I suppose that whether the Humber is indeed experienced as placid and meandering depends upon how you’re placed with respect to it, whether—for instance—like one of the field

trippers, you've ever been in a canoe before and have the strength to move the boat against the current!

The Humber River stretches about 100 kilometres north and west of the city, uniting the shores of Lake Ontario with waterways linked to Lake Huron and Lake Simcoe. This route represented the historic Carrying Place Trail used by native peoples and then Europeans for migration and trading. In 1615, Etienne Brûlé was the first white man to encounter the Humber River, traveling on a mission from Samuel de Champlain to build alliances with the natives (Canadian Heritage River System, n.d., Humber River: "Geography" section ¶ 1; "Human Heritage" section, ¶ 2). Brûlé couldn't read or write, so we don't have his firsthand description of the Humber (*First white man to see Toronto*, n.d., ¶ 6). But we've given his name to the riverside park that provided the point of embarkation for our canoe trippers.

A not-so-placid Humber also has links to more recent Toronto history, links to which our four canoeists found references along their way.

Image 7. Old Mill sign

As one of them wrote

Before we even entered the water, I read the historical information signs near the Old Mill bridge regarding Hurricane Hazel. "Two metres of rain fell in 24 hours that fateful night in October 1954 and the river banks flooded. 81 people were killed. When 14 houses on Raymore Avenue slid down a hill into the river, 35 neighbours alone drowned...."

Nature had definitely intervened with authority upon man. Since Hurricane Hazel, flood control measures have taken place to "control" the Humber. In fact, we actually witnessed city workers in a tractor placing a weir ... near the mouth of the river, to build on the existing walls. This image blurred the lines as to who was intervening on whom, the river on man, or vice versa. (B., field trip documentation sheet, p. 2)

These notes recount the surprises, the unpredictability that the natural world represented to this teacher candidate and his fellow canoeists. Their ability to engage with unpredictable experience physically, intellectually, and *aesthetically* is characteristic of this field trip.

Even more, I had propose that this ability to engage with and respond to surprises, to make it up as they go along, may well be enhanced in artists, whose professional activities are—as Stephen Nachmanovitch reminded us at the outset of my talk—based in improvisation. Perhaps this background gives artists an advantage as we learn to teach.

Image 8. Feet in canoe

Other theorists and researchers have discerned connections between artistic and teaching practices. Here, for example, are the comments of Terry Jenoure (2002), a musician and a teacher in higher education in the U.S. Where she writes ‘researcher’, I also read ‘teacher’:

My thinking is rooted in and shaped by my early training as an improvising musician. As I self-reflect, I see that I am always functioning as though I’m on the bandstand. What does this mean to my work as a researcher? It means that I continually apply many of the principles of jazz improvisation to my nonmusical engagements. (p. 86)

Surveying the work of other researchers, artist and university educator Rae Anderson (1997) reports some “commonalties of approach between artistic behaviour and teaching. Artists and teachers, for instance, are required to know themselves in order to help others know themselves; they both are communicators; and inquiry or curiosity are essential to both practices” (p. 38).

One way to think about the benefit of having an artist as a classroom teacher is to consider the benefits of art education to learners, about which we have abundant research. For instance, a survey of teachers conducted for Ontario’s Ministry of Education found that the arts help students learn generally “through improving perception, awareness, concentration, uniqueness of thought style, problem-solving, confidence and self-worth, and motivation” (R. Courtney & P. Parks, as cited in Campbell & Townshend, 1997, p. 10).

If these benefits are seen to accrue to the *child* who learns with, through, and about the arts, surely these attributes would tend to be deeply rooted in an *artist*, who has had extensive, disciplined training in the arts. Just as surely, these attributes and the artist's past experience would affect his or her philosophy of teaching. For the artist and the artist's students, the arts can become a prism through which teaching and learning is viewed.

Such is the case of one of York's teacher candidates, a musician. In presenting his teaching philosophy to the class, he said:

I'd like to begin by engaging you in my vision of what I feel would be the perfect environment for young minds. I am a musician who in [the] last three years has taken a great interest in Latin conga and bongo drumming. Through music and in particular the traditions of drumming I will illustrate my perfect classroom. At the heart of most Afro-Cuban rhythms is the clave pattern. A clave is a constant two bar rhythmic pattern with specific positioning of the accents that repeat throughout a song.

...The clave will be the foundation of my classroom. It will represent the consistent strength of community inside the room. Its repeating pattern signifies what my students can expect every time they walk through the door. They will encounter a safe environment, one that guides us back on track when we get lost. One that holds us together while others catch up and one that doesn't judge others on where they came from or where they are going. (J., unpublished paper, p. 1)

Given these beliefs, it's no surprise that this teacher candidate created a drum...

Image 9. J.'s drum

... to represent his journey from artist to teacher—a drum decorated with images and texts from his personal and professional lives.

This drum collage was created as part of the year-end hands-on art assignment I mentioned at the top of my talk. This assignment aimed to give students an opportunity to take up an aspect of their personal journey towards becoming a teacher using two forms of art. Since I was available to work with students as artist-in-residence, visual art was the one assigned

form for this project. For their second form of expression, students chose amongst drama, music, and dance.

Here's another teacher candidate's visual work, seen here in two views.

Image 10. D.'s collage

He uses his own footprints to represent his journey. And in his presentation, he quoted the words of Grace Feuerverger (2001), who proposes a kind of 'making it up as we go along'. She writes: "Our steps invent the path as we proceed; behind us they leave no trace, only the void. So we shall always look ahead and trust our feet. They will take us as far as our minds will go" (p. 113).

I very much appreciate this mention of 'mind', since it hearkens back to my remarks at the beginning of this paper about the intellectual underpinnings of 'making it up'. Those of us seized by the muses of improvisation are not simply winging it, without hard study and preparation.

The mind is what sets the overall direction for the journey. The mind—and the heart, too, of course—hold the values that help orient the person who is making it up as he or she goes along.

Those values help decide on the general orientation of a field trip, for instance....

They help decide whether to take...

Image 11. Subway train

...the subway over...

Image 12. Humber footbridge

...the footbridge across or the canoe down the river, for instance. Those who value discovery in the natural world might choose the canoe, just as someone who responds to experience through art-making might create a series of collages to represent her journey into teaching.

Image 13. E.'s collages

These works use collage and coloured pencils, drawing being a way this teacher candidate sees the world.

In fact, are her own words on the subject:

I am thinking about teaching and drawing as mark-making. I am specifically thinking about the courage and self-confidence involved in making marks; the acceptance that I have thoughts and ideas that are worth committing to paper or marking my students with. (And I am not talking about assessment!) (E., unpublished artist's statement, p. 1)

As I mentioned earlier, students were asked to work with visual arts and one other expressive medium, dance, drama, or music. This was to ensure that every student had the opportunity to employ one area of strength, and another of novelty. We were hoping to provide both comfort and the opportunity to risk, which some students enjoyed—including this visual artist, for instance.

Image 14. E. on side, four papers visible

Here is what she wrote about the companion work to her polished collages.

My second medium will be dance, for two reasons. First, because it is the medium that I am most afraid to teach, and this exercise will help me get over that. Secondly, I want to recreate with my body the feelings I have when I create a work of art....

Image 15. E. marking on page

Art-making is an intensely personal activity for me, and I hope that through the performative aspect of dance...

Image 16. E. sitting, profile

... I will be able to express to others what I feel inside. (E., unpublished artist's statement, p. 1)

I have great respect for this teacher candidate, for her willingness to be vulnerable in her work, to struggle to learn a choreography and then to let go and 'make it up as she went along'.

Willingness to be vulnerable is a quality prized by many of these teacher candidates, too. Reading through their written teaching philosophies, I would often come across the following quotation from the assigned reading by bell hooks (1994):

Any classroom that employs a holistic model of learning will also be a place where teachers grow, and are empowered by the process. That empowerment cannot happen if we refuse to be vulnerable while encouraging students to take risks. (p. 21)

I believe that artists who become teachers may have an added advantage when it comes to risk-taking. Because of their past artistic practices, they are likely to be familiar with ambiguity, uncertainty, and feelings of loss of self. And they may well have some experience of the compensations of such risk-taking, too.

Image 17. Blue heron

Here's how one of the teacher candidates, a musician, described what I am getting at:

I am an artist. I am blessed with a special touch of how to make life interesting; how to put a little sway into everything I do; how to deviate a bit from normalcy. My life is based on the recycling of ideas in an imaginative way. I am well acquainted with my inner self and with these resources I can come up with different answers or new expressions to old clichés.

Then, all of a sudden, here I am, a teacher!...as if I didn't know that before. The difference now is that I am politically accepted and do have the opportunity to now do something about the systems that I lambasted in the past. I can do musical-math or dramatic science or whatever I wish to call it.” (K., unpublished paper, p. 2)

And he concludes his paper in a similar vein:

I am an artist ... remember? I know how to dance. I know how to weave. I know how to blend. Shouldn't I know how to modify[?] Well...this is the opportunity I've been waiting for. An opportunity to show how best I can meet the needs of the student by modifying the curriculum to fill his needs.

I don't care for a class of well-behaved students who always seem to get it right...then it leaves me no room to create and dance and weave and modify. How could I ever make a difference in an environment where there is a surplus of contentment[?] What risk is there to take when peace and harmony abound[?] Linda Briskin, in the forward to *Wild Garden* (1997)—one of the texts of this course—was reflecting on how [her colleague, artist and educator] Dian Marino would [have been] had she [survived her battle with cancer]:

“...she would have gone on deconstructing, reconstructing, taking risks, ‘embracing the mess’, learning by mistakes, affirming mistakes and bouncing wild and wonderful ideas around....” (p. 18) (K., unpublished paper, p. 3)

Or, using the phrase that I am proposing here: she would have gone on ‘making it up as she went along’.

That's what I am hoping for myself and for these very special-to-me teacher candidates, as we go further on our journeys into teaching.

Image 18. T. at the lake shore

I would like to end today's field trip here, on the shores of Lake Ontario, on this note of optimism. After all, that's the tone of voice of the beginner, the tone of most of the teacher candidates with whom I had the great joy of working this past year. I hope their optimism will buoy them as they get jobs and become more familiar with the challenges of teaching in today's environment.

Of course, I could offer all kinds of contextual information to temper the optimism, to add some necessary complexity to this discussion of artists learning to teach. I am thinking descriptions of the cutbacks and unrest in Ontario education; of the decline in specialist teachers in Ontario schools, especially arts teachers; of the numbers of teachers leaving the profession in my home province and all across Canada.

But since you probably know that version of reality better than I do, I *will* end today's field trip here, on a note of celebration. Today, we safely negotiated the meandering Humber, no flood waters in sight. And so we are a little further along our artists' journeys into teaching.

I hope that this brief sketch of teacher candidates' creative activities can remind you of the benefits and richnesses of arts-integrated learning, not just for children in classrooms, but for teacher candidates in Faculties of Education, too.

In closing, I would like to thank the students of year's course in Arts and Ideas for the grandeur of their beliefs and their permission to me to use their representations here, and especially to the four intrepid, imaginative canoe trippers.

And I would like to thank you as well for your attention this afternoon.

¹ In securing the students' permission to use their images and words in my own work, I promised to keep their identities confidential. Accordingly, throughout this paper I've referred to them by initials only. The downside

of this is that I can't give the students specific credit for their extraordinary work, as I would wish to, one professional to another.

² 'Teacher candidate' is York University's term for a student enrolled in a BEd program, learning to become a classroom teacher.

³ This group of students was particularly taken by the notion of "intervention" as an artistic practice, as presented to them by Janna Graham of the Art Gallery of Ontario's Education department (in class presentation, October 1, 2003). As she put it, "the word intervention implies a disruption of the status quo", by a contemporary artist engaging in "practices and disciplines ranging from site-specific gallery art, to public art, to community arts and activism, to tourism, and museum education" (J. Graham & D. Van Den Brekel, unpublished manuscript, p. 10, p. 2). The four teacher candidates considered their canoe trip as an artistic 'intervention' into the Humber River, with the trip itself being the aesthetic experience. This approach is occasionally reflected in the canoeists' choice of language to describe their experience.

⁴ I was introduced to the phrase 'wild zone' by the writings of Susan Buck-Morss, particularly in Chapter 1 of *Dreamworld and Catastrophe: The Passing of Mass Utopia in East and West* (2000, p. 3-4). There, she uses the term to describe the contemporary realm of power that is "already *more* than democracy-and consequently a good deal less", that is beyond traditional accountability. She writes "Modern sovereignties ... possess a supralegal or perhaps prelegal form of legitimacy, precisely the wild zone of arbitrary, violent power, and it lies at their very core." My borrowing of the term 'wild zone' here reflects this notion of an outsider realm that has depths beyond polite reckoning, that in this case is descriptive of a physical city space and the uses to which it is put by human and non-human inhabitants.

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