Learning from the Inside Out: Using Art to Deal with Difficult Issues in the Classroom

Marjorie Cohee Manifold
Assistant Professor: Art Education
School of Education
Indiana University, USA
E-mail: mmanifol@indiana.edu

Abstract

Discussions of events and issues that cause grief may be seen as too difficult to be discussed openly in the classroom since they may trigger emotionally charged responses from distressed students. The author of this paper argues that grief work and aesthetic experiences have similar dimensions that may be triggered by engagements with art and art making. The role of imagination in the grief work process is described. Strategies for using art to call forth various tools of imagination to assuage the anxieties of grieving students and awaken empathy among non-grieving students were used during a workshop for pre-service and in-service teachers. The aim of the workshop was that its participants experience how knowing of and within works of art assists a restructuring of one’s ability to make meaning of the world. As a result, the workshop participants were able to model, design and implement experiences in which art was used to bridge to inner and outer spaces of knowing, and refocus the attentions of anxious or grieving students towards learning.

Keywords: Grief Work, Art Education, Aesthetic Experience, Imagination, Learning Workshop
Typically art teachers have focused students’ attentions on aesthetically pleasing or intriguing, well-crafted images, objects, and expressions. Art that draws forth deeply felt emotions of unhappy experiences has been understood as the province of art therapists. Yet, however diligently teachers strive to ward it off, sorrow creeps into the lives of schoolchildren and spills into classrooms. Disappointment and misfortune are realities of human existence and are experienced—often profoundly—by people of all ages. When experienced by schoolchildren, unhappiness may adversely affect learning. Grief, which will be defined throughout this paper as that mental anguish experienced as a “psychological, somatic, and emotional response” to loss (Parker, 2005), may work against a student’s ability to focus attention on instruction and impede retention of information (Goleman, 1995).

Perceiving and making art, on the other hand, has been observed to have calming, therapeutic affects on emotional suffering. Therefore, even though an art teacher may not intend to address children’s distress through art, inviting students to perceive and make art may inadvertently serve this purpose.

Recently, while teaching art education in a large Midwestern University, I designed and offered a one-week workshop for teachers, “Using Art to Deal with Difficult Issues in the Classroom.” The purpose of the course was to present strategies for refocusing attentions of anxious or grieving students towards learning. Processes that assist grief-stricken individuals in regaining psychological balance needed for re-engagement in life and learning, have been collectively described as “grief work” (Freud, 1915), and entail interactions of reflective and social elements. Yet, discussions of events and issues that cause grief are often avoided within classroom settings for fear they might trigger emotionally charged responses from distressed students. Such issues may be seen as too difficult to be discussed openly in the classroom. Difficult issues might include: being excluded from play or bullied on the playground, dealing with family separation or divorce, feeling insecure as a result of media exposure to various disasters, or experiencing the profound loss of a friend or family member through death. Because strategies that effectively address grief have been found to result in people becoming more compassionate of their own and others’ suffering (Hogan & Schmidt, 2002), the strategies to be
presented during the “Using Art” workshop were deemed appropriate for classrooms that might include both grieving and non-grieving students.

**Grief, Grief Work, and Aesthetic Experience**

Supporting the workshop topic as relevant to art education is the notion that powerful events, whether they be wondrous or tragic in nature, are in effect “peak” (Maslow, 1988/1962) or “aesthetic experiences” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997). Csikszentmihalyi describes aesthetic experiences as unfolding in sequenced order through stages or “dimensions.” First, a sudden sensory stimulus attracts one’s attention to something out-of-the ordinary. This triggers a powerful second dimension of emotional response, which compels questions regarding the meaning of the event. In the third dimension, cognitive processes go to work reasoning, ordering, and making sense of the phenomenon. Finally, one arrives at a sense of resolution, completion, or of being somehow qualitatively different than one was prior to the aesthetic experience. In other words, curiosity is stimulated: learning results as imagination and reason work together to structure or restructure meaning (Manifold, 2005; 2005a).

Traumatic experiences differ from aesthetic experiences to the degree that they profoundly challenge one’s understanding of the world and “stimulate questions concerning the meaning of existence” (Parker, 2005). The first three stages of deep grieving are mirrored reversals of the dimensions of aesthetic experience identified by Csikszentmihalyi. In studies that included young children as subjects, Bowlby (1991) found that the immediate grief response is one of numbness, or lack of sensory awareness. This is often followed by detachment from emotions, then by confusion and disorientation (Nerkin, 1993). An awakened state of internal reflection (Nerkin, 1993) and social interaction (Janoff-Bulman, 1992) are needed to turn the anesthetic experience of grief toward grief-work. Just as in aesthetic experiences, the end result of grief work would be a state of growth as the “core space of self-identity” (Nerkin, 1993) is restructured to accommodate a new sense of the world and one’s place within it. Art
may play a role in grief work, since art draws upon feelings, abstract memories, metaphoric associations, and narratives to weave conscious explanations and new meanings within this internalized core, or “liminal” space (Hall, 1989/1983). Art stimulates and guides those imaginative tools that work to reconstruct new narratives or “personal mythologies” (Feinstein & Krippner, 1997).

In the art teacher preparation and general art education courses at our university, pre-service and in-service teachers have been instructed in a variety of strategies for critical engagements with art (Anderson, 1993; Feldman, 1981) that include describing and analyzing the sensory qualities, compositions, content and contexts of artworks in order to arrive at interpretive meaning. These lead to judgements about the valuation of the works (Broudy, 1972). Although the approaches function by gradually bringing perceivers to internalize the ineffable aesthetic meanings of artworks, the approaches begin with conceptual attention to artworks as detached or externalized things. Because the grieving student’s internal sense of ordering meaning has been disrupted, he or she may have restricted abilities to organize, or make sense of that external information which requires focused rational–cognitive processing. In cases where engagements with art are intended as strategies for assisting grief work, a more effective approach might be one that required the immediate experience of feeling and “knowing of and within” the work of art (Reimer, 1992, p. 34). This approach might also connect and overlap the dimension of sensory response to aesthetic experience with the sleeping (anesthetic) dimension of grief.

Strategies of Imagination

Notions of educator Kieran Egan (2005; 1997) have implications for how felt experiences of and within art might promote grief work. Egan understands imagination as the principle intellectual tool working to construct meaning within that internal core where one’s personal mythologies are formed. For Egan, imaginative thought, as sine qua non of meaning making, awakens in stages from Somatic, Mythic, and Romantic, to Philosophic, and ultimately Ironic modes. Through
the early Somatic through Mythic stages, the specialized aspects of imagination at work include: response to rhythm as a means of finding attunement with the natural world and others of one’s intimate community; metaphor as a bridging of abstract and logical thinking; and narrative, whose elements are recognized as yielding to new form. A mother’s instinctual rocking motion and impulse to croon lullabies to her crying infant suggests the soothing effect of Somatic rhythm. Notions of Mythic imagination at work in grief work are implied by findings that even profoundly grieving individuals are able to use metaphors as frameworks for visualizing new life narratives (Swartzborden, 1992). These modes continue to support meaning making throughout one’s life.

In the Romantic stage, which Egan (1997) gives as awakening and developing in children between the ages of seven to fourteen, imagination thrives on increasingly complex stories that include multiple subplots and layered meanings within dualistic parameters. For example, although the world may be simplified and defined by binary opposites—good/bad, heroes/villains, etc.—there is a need to explore the extremes and depths of those opposites and to list, collect, and catalogue in minute detail the ground between the opposing polarities. There is a sense of awe, wonder and curiosity of that which lies at the parameters of the ordinary; these give clues to the workings of things. The romantic imagination wonders how pieces of the world fit together. Puzzles, riddles, and conundrums compel a pitting of wits against the logical universe: to solve a puzzle is to see the universe as infinitely simple and within grasp or control.

Here again, there is a parallel to studies related to working through grief toward growth. Parker (2005) explains that individuals develop understandings or ‘views’ of reality that, if untested, prove stable frameworks for making sense of the world. Loss challenges sense of justice and personal control (Marrone, 1999). The personal mythology one has woven of the world and one’s place in it is conflicted and may be undone (Feinstein & Krippner, 1997). It is necessary that, as a part of grief work, the grieving individual restructure a new understanding of self within a contextual narrative of the world.

Youth beyond early adolescence are capable of engaging Philosophic imagination (Egan, 1997) whereby, armed with all the
imaginative tools of earlier stages, deeper and more complex understandings of the universe are sought. Dualistic distinctions and parameters are challenged and collapsed onto an ambiguous ground. Those relying on philosophic modes of meaning making search beneath the surfaces of ideas and phenomena for subtleties and complexities, entertain multiple interpretations, and, eventually, come to an acceptance of the ultimate irony—that the secrets of the universe may never be known, yet, life has meaning within the mystery. Although these Philosophic and Ironic modes are generally associated with older adolescents and adults, even very young children can and must come to accept the ineluctability of loss and attain some measure of Philosophic recognition and Ironic acceptance.

When applying Egan’s notions of imagination to the topic of the workshop, teachers were to recognize the characteristics of various tools of imaginative thinking at work in resources such as children’s picture books and artworks. They were to model feeling into and within works of art, and they were to make artworks, artistic sketchbooks, or visual journals in response to those felt experiences. Becoming personally aware of the powerful emotions and imaginative mental processes that engaging with art can elicit, and recognizing the potential for art as a focus for shared experiences of grief work were goals of the workshop. Also, the participants were to understand that, if equilibrium is to be regained in order that learning may take place, the impulses to reconcile personal experience with meaning in the world must come from within the suffering individual. The teacher’s role is necessarily limited to that of empathetic guide.

The Workshop Activities

The “Using Art” workshop was held during summer of 2006 and met from 9 AM to 4 PM for one week, Monday through Friday. Advertisement of the workshop brought such heavy response from in-service and pre-service teachers that it became necessary to enlist art teacher and artist Laurie Gatlin as co-instructor when the anticipated enrollment of twelve more than doubled to twenty-five. The participants were all female. They included upper level undergraduate and graduate art
education students, in-service art teachers, and pre-service and in-service generalist classroom teachers. The workshop was offered as an elective course that might fulfill either studio or curriculum and instruction elective requirements of the academic program. In-service teachers could take the course to fulfill a licensure stipulation requiring continued education toward a master’s degree.

On the first day of the workshop, following a presentation of the theoretical rationale for the course and the conceptual model to be explored, a warm-up activity introduced participants to the types of philosophic questions a grieving person might intuitively pose. Then workshop participants were invited to explore children’s books as resources that might present similar questions and suggest resolutions to these universal concerns. Working in small groups, the workshop participants were invited to look through a variety of pre-selected books (see Appendix), consider the difficult situation each book addressed, and discuss the degree to which the question elicited by the situation was answered or left open for the reader to ponder. The book was studied to determine how the imagery and text worked together to create mood, soothing tenor, and meaning. The most sensitively composed books allowed narratives to unfold slowly in a rhythmic fashion similar to music. They reiterated meter, metaphor and other meaning-making processes associated with the mythic stages of imaginative work. Words and images were woven together in ways that led readers along narrow paths towards the authors’ conclusions. Readers need not have attended critically to the details and nuances of the visual tale as they were swept along towards its finalé. Thus, the workshop participants saw how carefully selected picture books might model the somatic and mythic impulses that assuage chaotic emotions in those who are in early ineffable stages of grief.

---

1. Professional development workshops, offered during the summer art education program at our university, are generally limited to 12–15 students.
2. An open-ended question, such as “What is joy?” was presented. Each student, in turn, was to build upon, adapt, or bend the original question toward a new direction. For example, the first student might respond, “What is the source of joy?” The second might ask, “Why is there sorrow in the world?” The third add, “Can anything sorrowful be beautiful?” and so on.
Perceiving Works of Art

Because the elements that contribute to meaning are presented all at once in single works of art, and because interpretations are not always obvious, reading a work of art can be a more difficult undertaking that reading a picture book. Each perceiver of a single work of art must interpret its story through the filter of his or her own experience, history, cultural and personal associations. Therefore, the next activity would invite participants to attend to single artworks.

On the morning of the second day, the workshop participants met at the university art museum where they were divided into three smaller groups. One member of each group was given a worksheet of questions to be considered and answered without guidance from the curator, docents, or the instructors. Then members of each group were led to an artwork and asked to explore the work with others of that group for the duration of the 45-minute exercise.

The first group was invited to engage with Swing Landscape (1938), by Stuart Davis. They noticed how the shapes, lines, and colors suggested a rhythmic visual flow that made analogies to staccatos and halting rests but did not allow the eye to come to an emphatic stop anywhere within the composition. They came to understand the visual image was a synesthesia of early American swing jazz music. The effect was pleasantly calming yet invigorating, “as if life swept one along in a bright, rhythmic sway, accented here and there with staccato beats, minor notes, and dark tonal inflections,” stated one group participant. Overall, they concluded that the work appealed most strongly to somatic and mythic modes of imaginative effort.

Members of a second group were to critically examine The Finding of Moses (1629) by Flemish artist Hendrick de Clerck. Painted in the traditional style of sumptuous Renaissance-era narrative tableaus, the

4 Oil on panel 55 _ x 66 in. (140.3 x 167.6 cm); frame: 61 x 72 in. (156.2 x 182.9 cm) Gift of Stanley W. Wulc, 66.24. May be viewed online at http://www.iub.edu/~iuam/provenance/view.php?id=277.
composition depicts a well-known Judeo-Christian story\textsuperscript{5}. Workshop viewers of the painting noticed the counterbalancing dualism between the princess’s retinue and the enslaved Hebrews. They commented upon the correspondence between the shapes of the Pharaoh’s daughter’s breasts and the rounded arches of the distant bridge, from which slain infants are being cast into the milky (fertile) waters of the Nile. Also, the viewers responded to the agitation of the baby, whose apparent anguish should spur a mother to instinctually comfort him. Yet here, the surrogate mother surveys the situation with coolly rational dispassion while the true mother must constrain her tender concern to a single subtle gesture—the touch of a curl from his brow. The viewers agreed that a careful reading of the story, with all its visually presented texts, dense subtexts and tense mini-narratives, could satisfy romantic interests in subjects that portray extreme limits of passionate love and human restraint, tender compassion and utter cruelty, helpless despair and resourcefulness in overcoming adversity. Storied images such as this might be called upon as stimulus for discussions about human motives and choices of action, as well as of the consequences of particular behaviors.

The third group was to study one of Joseph Cornell’s enigmatic boxes\textsuperscript{6} and consider how it might awaken the philosophical imagination. Those who pondered Cornell’s work expressed surprise that an art object that had seemed so inscrutable upon first viewing quickly yielding to their investigative prodding by revealing a trove of possible meanings. Cornell’s incongruent collection of objects inspired a torrent of historic, geographic, psychological, and personal associations. The presence of a little seashell recalled the ocean, the tides kept in

\textsuperscript{5} The Hebrew slaves of Egyptian had grown so populous as to threaten to the balance of power within the nation. Therefore, the pharaoh had ordered a slaughter of all male Hebrew infants. Moses’ mother and sister, Miriam, hid him in a basket at the river’s edge where the Pharaoh’s daughter bathed regularly. When the princess found the child, she was moved to rescue him and raise him as her own. In this scene, she is being persuaded by Miriam to procure a wet nurse—the child’s mother in disguise—to tend the babe.

\textsuperscript{6} Although the specific work examined by these students is not available online, information about Cornell and a selection of his works may be viewed online at http://www.artchive.com/artchive/C/cornell.html, and http://www.ibiblio.org/wm/paint/auth/cornell/.
balance by the moon, human’s evolution from the sea, and personal experiences of playing along the ocean. Students wondered at juxtaposing references to the expanse of the universe and a tiny bit of life in the shape of a star. They came to see this as metaphor for the macro and microcosmic elements upon which all our lives depends, between infinite and intimate time, between open and enclosed or outer and inner spaces, between the philosopher’s pondering of that which is profoundly meaningful and the magically superfluous play of children.

Bolstered by having shared impressions with others who supported and built upon their initially tentative offerings, members of each group seemed to gain confidence and a sense of empowerment regarding their abilities to find meaning in otherwise mysterious works of art. They were encouraged to find a place within themselves that corresponded with the meanings of the images.

**Perceiving and Making Art as Metaphor of Self**

The next activity required each participant to draw again upon personal imagination in finding a work of art with which she intuited an affinity. After selecting the work, she was to research the artist and artwork, keep a record of the information uncovered by research, note how she felt about or responded to that information, determine how it contributed to her understanding or insight of the work, and—most importantly—consider how the work might be a metaphor for some aspect of her life. Afterwards, she was to create an artistic expression, in the form of an artistic journal or sketchbook, as a visual narrative of her journey from artwork to self-discovery. The goal of using art to deal with difficult issues in the classroom was not simply that students draw understandings about sorrow from works of art done by others but that students might create new meanings from their own difficult and emotionally painful experiences. Art-making, by requiring that the maker respond to tacit clues and felt awareness through gesture, may be especially effective in calling forth and putting to work deeply.

---

7 In many respects, the assignment resembles a similar activity asked of students and recorded by the author in a previous publication (Manifold, 2005a), with one significant difference. The participants of the “Using Art” workshop were not required to write a paper about their work.
embedded comprehension of internal states of being. Neurologist and learning theorist Frank R. Wilson (1998) reiterates the notion of mind and hand working together in a feedback loop to bring about therapeutic effects. He affirms, “when we form something through artistic ability, we are formed and changed in the process, and that spurs the developmental process” (pp. 68–69).

Although considerable latitude was given as to the form the artistic journal–sketchbook might take, collage was suggested because the media is seen as lending itself to the flow-of-consciousness processes that the search for a metaphor of self requires. To provide models for this work, assistant instructor Laurie Gatlin brought several exemplars of her own handmade books. She demonstrated methods of constructing books and demonstrated collage techniques that could be used to compose the pages of the book.

The process of collage imposes interplay of fragments from multiple sources that challenge artists and perceivers to draw upon memories of lived experiences and recall knowledge of cultures and traditions to make sense of disparate artifacts. Because “the creating of each fragment, each articulation—be it text, artwork, or some combination of forms—influences and is influenced by others” ( Vaughan, 2005 ), the metaphoric associations that may be drawn from a single work might depend upon an endless variety of subtle, ephemeral, synchronistic connections between the artist and her work. In fact, the artist’s choice of materials may not depend so much upon a conscious act as upon an intimate dialogue with the forms within and without, that is, “an active interplay or coupling, between the perceiving body and that which it perceives..... at the level of ..... spontaneous sensorial engagement ( Abram, 1996, p. 57).

Sharing Self Discoveries

On the third day of the workshop, each participant came prepared to share images of the artworks she had selected and the artistic

8 A selection of pages from Laurie Gatlin’s artists books are available for viewing at: http://firstclass.plainfield.k12.in.us/~Laurie_Gatlin/sketch/comppobook.htm, and http://firstclass.plainfield.k12.in.us/~Laurie_Gatlin/sketch/artjournal_2.htm
work she had created as a metaphor of self. Working in small groups without the intervention of the instructors, the students presented their images, artistic journal–sketchbooks, and emotional accounts of the metaphoric association and the journeys they had taken in recalling and reconstructing these personal accounts. The images and objects produced during these self–exploratory journeys were crafted with extraordinary care—especially given that over a fourth of the workshop participants had had little or no formal art background beyond middle school. A social studies teacher, for example, chose Venus of Willendorf as a self–metaphor. Her three–dimensional sketchbook–journal was a small decorated box filled with hand–printed and collaged prayer cards. Each card spoke of a painful or joyous benchmark in her life and invoked the ‘goddess’ of history to put these events into proper perspective so that equilibrium and continuity be reassured. Other students created picture books, paintings, posters, or sculptural pieces. The narratives these inspired were shared and received with reverent respect that implied each student’s recognition that what was being revealed was a sacred aspect of the presenter’s inner being.

Although several of the workshop participants had previously known one another in other classroom contexts, all the students described this activity as awakening new depths of knowing and caring for one another. Empathy was engaged. “We knew things about one another before and we were friends,” Sadie said of her fellow students, “but this took us to another level of knowing. Now we care about each other.” This reiterated Hogan and Schmidt’s (2002) conclusions that successful grief work brings one to a greater sense of caring and compassion for oneself and others. Likewise, social engagement was a critical component of the grief work process as described by Janoff–Bulman (1992). Knowing that others cared deeply for one’s emotional well–being seemed to enhance the transcendent effect of the activity on the presenters to such powerful level that several students wept as they related a metaphoric correspondence of self and art.

The Final Project

As a final assignment, the participants of the workshop were given two options. They might identify an issue of concern to K–12 students
and create a teaching unit on that topic, or research a personally problematic issue through art making. In either case, they were to consider how their own grief work might inform greater understanding and compassion of children grieving from similar circumstances. All but five of the workshop participants selected the latter option.

In these final projects, the participants of the “Using Art” workshop demonstrated a grasp of what it means to trigger learning from within, through use of art and the tools of imagination. For several, this meant a personal exploratory journey in order to comprehend what the child might be experiencing. Guiding the child to apply imaginative tools toward grief work might depend upon the degree to which the teacher’s personal sensibilities could be brought into correspondence with the inner life of the students. Peggy, who works as a school counselor of a large urban elementary school, wanted to create a unit to address the problem of playground bullying. As she gathered materials for the unit, however, she came to recognize that she harbored unresolved grief of having allowed herself to be emotionally bullied by a former husband. Although she had ended the marriage several years earlier, she realized she was still hiding the pain of that abuse from her family, her friends, and herself. As cathartic expression, she created a collaged pastiche of images describing her descent, despair, revelation, and triumphant re-emergence from sorrow and secrecy of that experience. The journey of self-discovery was crucial to Peggy’s ability to intimately comprehend and address the complexities of feelings being experienced by her students in order to guide them out of cycles of bullying relationships.

Lula’s self-examination serves as an object lesson of how carefully teachers must look within themselves and feel within the student to guide rather than direct student learning. Her openly visualized anguish seems to have been too obvious for her own teacher to see. She wrote:

After my mom passed away . . . I tried to express my emotions through my artwork.

I once painted a tomb in my watercolor class. My professor asked me why I had drawn a tomb. I answered that this symbolized death. She said ‘you do not simply draw a tomb to represent death. It is too obvious.’ Maybe she was right. But . .
I was not trying to be an artist. I just wanted to relieve my pain.

This reinforced to Lula that, as a teacher, she should be sensitive to students whose work might not always be good art but might be deeply meaningful nonetheless.

**Implications for Art Education**

The participant’s evaluations of the workshop revealed that their own revelatory experiences during the workshop had changed their attitudes and ideas about how art might address difficult issues. They came to recognize the possibility that art might be used as an instrument for addressing the sorrows students bring into everyday classrooms and as a stimulus for students’ grief work. Also, art could awaken feelings of compassion, tolerance, and empathy among non–grieving students. Finally, the participants expressed an understanding that to affect learning from the inside out, a teacher must be willing to explore the fearful aesthetic terrain of his or her own life and seek a connective link to the imaginative realms of the student’s minds.

In the weeks that followed the workshop, several in-service teachers designed curriculum units that incorporated entry points for inserting student grief work. Tina, who instructed a group of adolescent girls in a community center, developed a unit that invited the girls to consider issues of feminine beauty and their desires to be beautiful, popular, and accepted by their peers. In order to attain their goals of peer acceptance, a few of Tina’s students had begun to follow punishing diets, restrain their behaviors, and become anxiously vigilant of their personal appearances and social interactions. The girls feared—and some had experienced—that expressing their real personalities, interests, and sense–of–styles might mark them as social pariahs among their peers. Tina invited her students to explore their conflicted anxieties through a collage mask–making project that required them to use visual images from beauty magazines as collage pieces. Through this cathartic experience, the girls came to recognize that their peers shared similar fears and came greater appreciation of their own and each others’ unique attributes.

Finally, the workshop participants were able to model, design and
implement lessons that recognized art as a bridge to inner and outer spaces of knowing. They came to an understanding that viewing sorrow from the outside may not immediately reveal the truth of the thing. Yet art might reveal visual roadmaps through diverse sorrows of the world. If grieving and non-grieving students are invited to explore difficult issues, the resulting grief work may lead to individual and communal growth and understanding. However, to affect this inside out learning, teachers must be willing to explore the fearful aesthetic terrain of their own lives and seek connective links to the imaginative dimensions of their students’ minds.

( The author would like to thank Ta–teh Ku and Tingting Wang, doctoral students of the Art Education program at Indiana University, for their Chinese translation of this article.)

References


**Appendix**

**Recommended children’s books in English include:**


